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

LG Horlings^{1,2}

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 world-wide 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

Figure 1

Place and place-shaping.

between different types of actors, and via deliberative modes of governance, including the local tacit knowledge of people in decision making.

Our assumption is that sustainable place-shaping practices are a transformative power, occurring via processes of (see Figure 1):

- re-appreciation, which includes perceptions, meanings and values attached to place, processes of sense-making and how actors take the lead in appreciating places;
- re-grounding, rooted in (agro-)ecological and cultural place-based assets and resources, influenced by wider communities, cultural notions, values, assets, technology and historical patterns;
- re-positioning, alternative, diverse or 'hidden' economies [23] and ways of value-adding, altering political-economic relations shaped by globalization.

Place-shaping is expressed in practices, co-created between people and their environment. In this co-creation, culture plays an important mediating role [24**]. The notion of co-creation acknowledges that human society is dependent upon natural systems, while at the same time human agency acts as the driver of ecosystem dynamics

[25,26*]. Places face all sorts of 'wicked' problems of sustainability and intertwined challenges of climate, energy, migration and poverty. These issues create inequalities, dependencies, competition and increased mobility's within and between places. Our assumption is that a place-based approach to sustainable development can provide a more systematic understanding of the place-specific connectivity between social-cultural, political-economic and ecological processes that enable or hinder transformation toward sustainability.

Transformation is understood here as the fundamental alteration of a (social-ecological) system, once the current conditions become untenable or undesirable and hence contested [27,28]. Transformation may be spontaneous or planned, often involve an intention to change a situation to a more beneficial state [29,30] and can take on a normative and deliberative dimension. This normative nature leads to ethical concerns such as what constitutes a more beneficial state of a system, for whom, at what scale and who determines this [31].

Place-shaping is not just influenced by the sphere of political-economic processes and by the practical sphere involving new knowledge, expertise, innovation, management and changing behavior. O'Brien and Sygna have argued that we also have to acknowledge the role of

individual and shared beliefs, values, worldviews and paradigms in transformational change, contributing to change from the insight out [32,33**]. This has been termed as the ‘inner’ dimension of sustainability [34] paying attention to the personal motivational, the symbolic and collective cultural values of people in sustainable development [35,36**]. A first step in a process of co-design is then to map these values and motivations, and discuss potential conflicts and joint interests with the stakeholders involved.

We would argue that sustainable place-shaping occurs via and helps us to understand how people make sense of their place and attach values to place, but also provides insight in practices which re-localize and re-embed daily lived practices in social–ecological systems and place-based assets, as starting points for sustainable development. A key question is to address the temporal, historical, spatial, value-led and multi-scale aspects of sustainability in places and (re-)connect people to place (including landscape, nature, soil, people’s capacities) by identifying, supporting and replanting ‘seeds of change’. Seeds of change unfold in innovative place-shaping practices, which can offer ways out of institutional and governance regimes that hamper development. Place-shaping practices can be identified, analyzed and (re-)planted in sites and places of social learning and experimentation where academic, non-academic and policy actors work together to enable transformative change. The central research question jointly developed by the actors involved in the co-design process was: how does place-shaping result in seeds of change, contributing to transformation to sustainability?

The social learning literature [37] points out that connecting social actors can contribute to transformation beyond the individual, and spreads within and across communities or groups. Action research can be used as a process of Appreciative Inquiry in which community members collaborate with researchers as partners to identify and respond to sustainability issues, through research, action and reflection. It builds on people’s knowledge, contributing to co-design and co-production toward place-based development, based on the existing strengths, assets, attached values, and well-working practices in places.

Research sites

TRANSPLACE was set out to address sustainability challenges in nine different social–ecological settings in three countries. The sites were selected to show contrasting place characteristics and actors involved, varied governance strategies and development pathways. Furthermore the sites face different learning and sustainability challenges. In the Southern Cape area in South Africa for example, issues such as food security, drought

and adaptation to climate change, landscape degradation, depletion of resources, rural-urban migration are interrelated and unfolding in places [31]. Slow variable background changes such as the effects of HIV/AIDS as well as short term stressors have locked households and communities into situations that prevent innovation and response. The former ‘apartheid’ regime has worsened inequality and poverty and has had a disempowering effect on poor people (S Shackleton, S Luckert, unpublished data). However, recently new community initiatives are emerging such as new agricultural cooperatives, run by black people previously working as farm workers.

The rural areas of the Minas Gerais in Brazil face scale enlargement and industrialization of farming, a loss of biodiversity and soil-fertility, erosion, food insecurity and rural-urban migration [38]. Here a joint learning process to introduce agro-ecological practices has been initiated in which farmers, unions, scientists and NGOs participate. These promising seeds of change have limited power in a setting dominated by a neo-liberal food regime. The challenge here is to disseminate positive learning experiences and develop supporting multi-scale policies.

In the Netherlands, rural places experience the side-effects of the dominant intensification and rationalization of land-use in the last decades, such as a loss of biodiversity, increased uniformity of landscapes and environmental pollution. However, in the research sites place-specific innovations occur, such as the provisioning of eco-system services by farmers cooperatives, multifunctional agriculture, new arrangements in landscape development and initiatives on localized food production. Here the challenge is to learn from such seeds of change, create experimental space and develop enabling policies to ‘upscale and out-scale’ these innovations.

During the project design a key-activity was a three-day workshop, organized in Grahamstown in South Africa in 2014, with principal investigators of Wageningen University, Rhodes University and the University of Viçosa, including visits to potential research sites. This meeting created the space to develop a joint language and framework, brought together researchers from different disciplines and knowledge in rural sociology, agro-ecology, and environmental sciences. Place-specific conditions in the South African sites could be identified via a meeting with the NGO Living Lands and visits to farmers and communities, facilitated by national government partner Siviwe Shawababa. A large part of the meeting was spent on the exchange of learning experiences in the nine sites, with the aim to understand the place-specific contexts and develop a joint research proposal.

Furthermore as part of the process various local and regional meetings were organized in each of the nine

sites with farmer's organizations and unions, representatives from public administration, NGOs and businesses, a process in which in total 80 people participated. At the sites a process of co-learning took place, which resulted in an overview of place-specific issues and challenges for learning. In South Africa a cooperation was established between the Environmental Department of Rhodes University, the NGO Living Lands, the Governmental Institute Department of rural development and land reform, and the Governmental Institute Department of Environmental Affairs. The NGO Living Lands showcased experiences with participative action research in the site Baviaanskloof where cooperation of farmers has been facilitated in order to restore the landscape. Students of Rhodes University carried out assignments in different sites and wrote reports on the sites Baviaanskloof and Yendalla Farm to analyze the place-based characteristics of the sites and the environmental problems (see pictures) [39–43]. The participation in TRANSPLACE of black landowners which have taken over land from white farmers in the context of land-reform policies, resulted in one of the key research questions: how to re-ground practices in place-based resources and build capabilities such as professional, management and business skills needed to organize these farmers in new cooperatives?

In Brazil there was already a multi-scale agro-ecology knowledge network in place. It encompasses relations between university, farmers cooperatives, farmers schools, the Federal University of Viçosa, the Brazilian Association of Agroecology, the farmers unions, the Centre for alternative technologies Zona da Meta, an agro-ecological network of the state and the Brazilian Association of Agroecology. This network facilitates extension projects and learning via the 'peasant to peasant' methodology, which means that farmers learn directly from each other's experiences. During the co-design process meetings were organized between key actors involved, and with representatives of family farmers organizations and unions from eight communities. Furthermore visits were organized by the principal

investigators to 20 agro-ecological and conventional farmers, to discuss the research agenda. One of the key issues which were jointly identified in these meetings was how to upscale agro-ecological 'seeds of change'.

In the Netherlands ten meetings were organized in three main areas. The main actors involved in the three sites were: Wageningen University, Via Natura (an organization in landscape development), the local municipality Berg & Dal, House of the Kempen (a multi-stakeholder platform), the WAV (a group of farmers working toward sustainability) and ILEIA, the facilitator of the Global AgriCulturesNetwork of practitioners. Although the key activities differ in the three sites, a key research question jointly identified here was how enabling local and regional governments can facilitate successful types of farmer's innovation in spaces of experimentation.

In summary, as a result of the process of co-design people and places were connected, relevant stakeholders were identified in all the sites, new knowledge networks were built between academics, non-academic practitioners and governments and existing relations were strengthened. With the term knowledge network we refer here to the aim of mutual learning and knowledge exchange between social actors of the different domains of academia, civil society and public policy [21]. The field visits, discussions and student research led to a deeper understanding of the place-specific conditions for change in the research sites. As a result of the process a joint research design was formulated with demand-driven questions and questions for follow-up research to support multi-scale learning (see Figure 2) which can take place via:

- (1) international meetings of the research team, international expert seminars, workshops, conferences etc. and knowledge dissemination via the worldwide AgriCultures Network of practitioners, facilitated by the organization ILEIA;
- (2) connectivity between practice, policy-makers and researchers in the sites via a participative research

Figure 2

Images of gully showing significant erosion and some sedimentation (Source: Ndobo), and measuring of grade of slope, soil texture and type by students (Source: Herd-Hoare)

approach, organizing meetings and knowledge exchange, and facilitating the strengthening and spread of seeds of change;

- (3) learning through ‘peasant to peasant’ methodology, and international farmers exchange visits in the three countries (Figure 3).

Lessons learned

The meeting of principal investigators in South Africa reinforced the interest in collaboration on issues such as place-shaping and the facilitation of innovation. During the meeting experiences with innovative methodologies to engage stakeholders were debated — including methods to analyze the role of culture and values in place — such as the ‘U-turn’ [44], value-mapping [45] and appreciative inquiry [46]. As the principal investigators have different disciplinary backgrounds, it took some time to develop a joint framework among the academic partners. The partners found each other in the phrase ‘connecting

people to place’ as the embedding of practices in social-ecological systems. The steps of the co-design process included various outputs and reflective activities like discussions with other researchers during a meeting on Sustainable Transformation in Potsdam, various presentations, blogs, reports of meetings and visits, and the joint monitoring of the co-design process itself [47]. A key outcome of the process of co-design was the making of an inventory of key actors, sustainability issues and social learning challenges in each of the research sites as shown in Figure 4.

By using face-to face-meetings, and not just mail and skype contacts, scientific synergy as well as personal chemistry, cultural differences and ideological aspects could be experienced and discussed among the participants. The varied cultural and ideological backgrounds of the academic and development partners turned out to be a challenge. Living Lands, one of the partners in the

Figure 3

Engagement and learning.

Figure 4

SITES AND SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGES	LEARNING ISSUES	ACTORS INVOLVED
SITE 1 South Africa, Baviaanskloof, Eastern Cape. The crisis in agriculture and water delivery as a result of degradation and erosion of the landscape	Process from individual to collective learning amongst commercial farmers Engaging with scientific knowledge networks to systemize and document the started participative process Co-governance in landscape restoration and maintenance Public-private cooperation with government, NGO's, and large sponsoring companies Embedded social learning, adapted to the specific context (Theory U) Identifying and supporting leaders or landscape champions Poverty reduction	Livings Lands (NGO); Researchers from different academic institutions.
SITE 2. South Africa, Yendalla and Trentham Park Farm, Eastern Cape. Pathways for agricultural development and food production in new land reform areas	Working with long established farm communities Creating new partnerships and facilitating the cooperation of different types of farmers Development of cooperatives and organisational issues Ideas/innovations to make the farms resilient Collective management; Clearing of alien species, reducing bush encroachment and restoration.	Farmer's cooperatives (Kamva Lesizwe); Department of Rural Development and Land Reform
SITE 3: South Africa, Ntabelanga dam catchment. Develop upstream water catchment and multi-stakeholder landscape management to reduce erosion and siltation in a new dam site	Working across different tenure systems and actors/stakeholders Engaging with researchers and scientific networks Land use management Co-governance of land use Restoration of gullies and wetlands Capacity building	Department of Environmental Affairs, Natural Resource Management Programme; Researchers and consultants and other knowledge brokers (e.g. NGOs).
SITE 4, 5, 6: Brazil, Araponga, Divino & Espera Feliz in the Minas Gerais Upscaling agro-ecological best practices. Focus per site: Land access via the Joint Land Conquest and influence of indigenous people (Araponga); Peasant to peasant exchange and land access via governance (Divino); Public policies (Espera Feliz).	Co-production of transformation in networks Gender and generation issues Empowerment of the farmers Dealing with differences in cultural background Understanding agro-forestry systems Long-term process of change and up-scaling of agro-ecological transformation	Rural workers unions; CTA-ZM; Family Farmer's school; Farmer's cooperative; Federal University of Viçosa (UFV).
SITE 7: Netherlands, Berg & Dal Arrangements for nature and landscape development, rural-urban relations.	Dealing with institutional thickness Development of a collective story-line Area-based organisation Re-positioning rural development Rural-urban connections Upscaling of governance	Via Natura (Landscape Fund); Local municipality Berg & Dal
SITE 8: Netherlands, Alblasserwaard/Vijfheerenlanden. Multifunctionality and a response to the disconnecting of practices and place.	Value-based aspects of rural development Reciprocity in international cooperation Cooperation between farmers and citizens Innovation in multifunctional rural practices Sustainable agriculture	WAV, a Working Group of Den Hâneker (Association of farmers and citizens).
SITE 9: The Netherlands, De Kempen region. Place-based food products, alliances, governance arrangements.	Role of intermediate multi-stakeholder organisations; Building of alliances, capacities and cooperatives; Development and facilitation of the participative democracy.	The Rural House of the Kempen (multi-stakeholder organisation/platform); Province North-Brabant.

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Key actors involved in knowledge networks and identified sustainability challenges and learning issues in the research sites.

project is working together with multinationals to support a participative learning process in the Baviaanskloof in South Africa. The participants of the University of Viçosa — inspired by Paolo Freire's [48] ideas about

empowerment and participation — were sceptical about this cooperation, while the academic participants from South Africa and the Netherlands were more pragmatic on these issues. Another point of discussion

was how to organize the knowledge exchange among farmers. On the basis of their positive experiences with agro-ecological networks and peasant-to-peasant learning in Brazil, the participants of the University of Viçosa suggested to include farmers visits in the research proposal.

Another challenge was the collaboration of practitioners, government officials and scientists with their different logics, timing and language. The provincial government considered the stakeholder dialogue in one of the potential sites in the Netherlands as 'too politically sensitive' for involving external academic experts in this process. Furthermore, academics face the challenge to develop mutual learning engagements with farmers in order to formulate research questions and lessons learned, while trying to avoid one-sided communication. Research shows that 'operational interfaces' bridging the difference between the domains of governance, practice and knowledge institutes can facilitate connections between actors from different domains and support collaborative modes of governance [49].

A positive outcome was that sites have been selected where there are (potential) seeds of change. Initiatives have been inventoried such as new farmers cooperatives in South Africa, social innovation in the governance of landscape development in the Netherlands and ecological agro-forestry practices in Brazil [47]. Further investigation is needed to analyze the potential of the place-shaping practices for transformational change toward sustainability.

In summary, the co-design process resulted in: an understanding of place-specific contexts and conditions which can enable change; the joint development of demand-driven research questions; joint learning about innovative research methods; the building of knowledge networks; an awareness of the varied backgrounds and ideologies of the partners.

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