

Strong resistance to making people think green

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Most of us know we should live in a more environmentally sustainable way. But it does not happen because we do not really feel involved

How can policymakers change the way people think? This is what the InContext project, funded by the EU, hopes to answer. Leading European research institutions in the fields of transition, behaviour and [sustainable development](#) are trying to create a manual for change. This

manual should ultimately be developed into a so-called 'Transition Theory' that is, as yet, unproven. And this theory, in its turn, should make it possible to change people's [mindset](#). For example, towards living in a more environmental sustainable way.

A number of pilot projects have been initiated in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands. The idea was to put this theory to the test, to refine it and hopefully to prove it right. For example, in the Dutch city of Rotterdam a community centre in the neighbourhood of Carnisse was facing cutbacks. It was due to be closed down in January 2012. Drift, the Dutch Research Institute for Transitions, which is a project partner, took it upon itself to help the people of Carnisse save it.

Project leader Julia Whittmayer, researcher and consultant, and other colleagues of Drift invited residents to come up with ideas, and to present them in brain storming sessions. This resulted in a plan of action. This also gave people an opportunity to decide themselves how they could help. It was expected that this process would provide inspiring examples from amongst the residents of Carnisse to motivate others to spring into action. Thus they would ultimately make a 'bigger noise' and save the community center. But to Whittmayer's dismay, many preferred "to be told what to do!" instead.

It might be true that inspiring examples can help change. But it is just as true that some people rather want to be told what to do, according to behavioural psychologist Max Mulder, who is a market researcher at the Dutch consultancy called Beautiful Lives, based in Hilversum.

For now, the community center survives. The city of Rotterdam has created a temporary rental contract at the very reasonable price of zero euros. So the immediate close-down is prevented. But Milja Kruijt, one of the volunteers involved in organising the action meetings has her doubts. "The city wants the center to start making money very soon, so it

can actually pay the real rent. I really don't believe this is going to happen. Carnisse is a poor neighborhood," she says.

And as far as the 'Theory of Transition' is concerned, Kruijt does not believe it is possible to apply it. "How change will happen is completely dependent on the situation," she points out, "You can't make rules for that. And what if these ever-so-important 'shining examples' just aren't there? Or get a new and demanding job? This is nonsense!"

Some scientists think Milja Kruijt is being too harsh. This is the case of behavioural psychologist Hans Ruitenber, who is co-founder and director of Project Helder, which is also trying to make people change their mind about sustainability. Ruitenber, based in the Hague, thinks it might be useful to formulate a theory of transition, mainly to give policymakers food for thought and inspiration. But a Holy Grail of change in the form of a General Theory of Transition is a myth according to him. "Human behaviour is simply too strongly influenced by all kinds of external and internal factors. Let try to create a simple toolbox of change and not pretend anything grander is possible"

Mulder is even more adamant: "It's a pessimistic thought, but a recipe for change cannot exist. Image running through steps 1 to 6 and hey presto: we've changed the way people think! It doesn't work that way. But I can imagine policymakers would kill to get their hands on such a recipe!"

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