



URBAN ARENAS
FOR SUSTAINABLE
AND JUST CITIES

Just Arenas

Guide for designing collaborative spaces for just sustainability transitions



Colophon

Title: **Just Arenas.**

Guide for designing collaborative spaces for just sustainability transitions

Authors:

Karlijn Schipper, Frank van Steenberg, Flor Avelino & Giorgia Silvestri

Contributors:

Duncan Crowley, Lucia Di Paola, Sophia Silverton, Sara de Maio, Sarah Rach, Magdalena Pitzer & Lara Hendrikx

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Design & Layout:

Stephan Köhler

Photography by:

Jan van der Ploeg and Duncan Crowley

Cover photo:

Giorgia Silvestri

Illustrations by:

Carlotta Cataldi

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCING THE 'JUST ARENA'

How to design and facilitate a collaborative process for accelerating transitions towards more just and sustainable urban futures? How to create a space where translocal learning, community building and transformative action are combined? In this guide we'll share our approach to these questions: the just arena. The 'just arena' is an approach towards designing and facilitating a learning process and a collaborative space aimed at transformative change.

1.1 Why organise a 'just arena'?

The global call for transformative change towards just and sustainable cities grows louder and louder. In a context of climate breakdown and a global pandemic, communities worldwide become increasingly aware of the persistency and interconnectedness of unsustainabilities and global inequalities. In order to tackle these challenges, we need systemic and transformative change, or in other words transitions. Just sustainability transitions are processes of long-term change in which the societal systems are structurally transformed as to improve the quality of life of present and future generations, and of all human and non-human living beings.

Transitions require the nurturing of alternative ways of doing, thinking *and* organizing in which social inequities and ecological unsustainabilities are addressed locally. In recent years such alternative approaches have emerged across European cities. All kinds of city makers have instigated and participated in local initiatives which are trying to transform current systems such as energy, food, housing, social security, and local democracy.

1.2 Why build a movement-of-movements?

Such approaches have contributed to several local successes and breakthroughs. However, they often remain marginal to the status quo. It has proven difficult to really alter, challenge and replace current dominant institutions. After years of pioneering and experimenting, the time has come to build an intersectional movement-of-movements that focusses on institutionalising and mainstreaming transformative approaches on a more

structural level. A movement that is able to tackle persistent institutional barriers such as legislation, funding schemes, protocols, paradigms etcetera and which anticipates the transition phase of phase-out and break-down.

This requires a cross-fertilization between different movements and approaches across scales (e.g., national, regional, global) and space (e.g., urban-rural, online-offline, present-future). This translocal perspective highlights that transferring different types of knowledge in which cultural and contextual differences are transcended, is crucial for working on transformative change.

1.3 What is a 'just arena'?

In this guide we introduce a methodology for creating a collaborative space for community building, social learning and transformative action: the just arena. The just arena is based on the transition arena method that has been developed, tested and refined over the past 20 years (see chapter 5). Originally the method of transition arenas was focused on specific sectors, regions, cities or communities. In this guide the just arena method is applied in a translocal setting and focusses on justice.

The core of the just arena method is that it is a temporary innovation network which tries to cross-fertilise different local and translocal communities and social movements. These translocal connections can occur at a national, regional and/or global scale, the point being that the local initiatives and communities are the main starting point. The arena methodology is aimed at nurturing, cultivating and connecting new and/or existing movements that advocate alternative ways of doing, knowing and organizing that are explicitly aimed at the intersection of justice and sustainability.

What differentiates this transition arena approach from other participatory processes, is its focus on transformative change. E.g., challenging, altering or replacing dominant ways of doing, thinking and organising. The transition arena provides participants access to different types of (actionable) knowledge, networks and other resources.

Just Arena Glossary

The transition arena is a temporary and open collaborative space and network for translocal learning. The space allows for the exchange of different experiences and modes of knowledge with the ultimate aim to inspire transformative action and radical transitions towards just and sustainable societies.

The transition arena (or arena) is the (virtual) space in time in which the community interacts and the activities and social learnings take place.

Sustainability refers to the process of striving towards a system that improves the quality of life and well-being; that meets the needs of both present and future generations and lives within ecosystem limits.

Justice refers to a diverse set of conditions - concerned with distribution of resources, political processes, and social recognition - that allows for full human flourishing within reasonable limits. It's fundamentally about how societies mend (or exacerbate) social inequities.¹

Transformative change refers to the changes in our ways of doing, thinking and organising that challenge, alter and replace dominant social structures and institutions.

Translocal refers to the connectedness between localities across different scales and spaces. We prefer to use 'translocal' rather than e.g. 'international' or 'transnational' to emphasize the local as the main focal point of embeddedness and connectedness, rather than thinking in terms of nation states or national borders.

1.4 For whom is a 'just arena' interesting?

This guide is for all city-makers that are interested in facilitating a translocal community learning process aimed at accelerating just sustainability transitions.

It provides inspiration and practical tips for people who recognize that a lot of transformative innovation is already happening, while also sharing a desire to bring it to a 'next level' in terms of institutionalizing and mainstreaming alternative ways of doing, knowing and organizing. Or in other words: this guide is for people who recognize the need for cross-fertilization of movements across places.

This can include policymakers who are able to strengthen (trans)local networks; researchers with an interest in creating and transferring actionable knowledge; NGO-representatives who wish to empower people to work on just sustainability issues; social entrepreneurs who would like to learn from peers in other contexts and sectors; companies that strive towards more impact and community activists and mobilisers that strive for systemic change on the local and/or global level.



Unsplash / Jon Tyson

¹ Kotsila, Connolly, Anguelovski, Dommerholt (2020) Booklet drivers of injustice in the context of urban sustainability. www.urban-arena.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Booklet-of-summaries_Arena_with-contacts.pdf.

1.5 The UrbanA project

This guide is based on our experiences in the EU-funded UrbanA project, as part of which we organized a transition arena process. The UrbanA project aimed to synthesize and broker actionable knowledge for sustainable and just cities generated by prior research and innovation projects. The arena was an open and collective process that consisted of four events and several other Community of Practice activities. The aim was to facilitate interaction among diverse participants, to empower them to apply this knowledge locally and to influence EU policies in favor of sustainable and just cities.

Throughout this guide we share lessons learned, reflections and examples based on our experiences in this project. We elaborate on the challenges we faced - that you might run into as well - and provide practical tips for how to deal with these.

At times we refer to the [UrbanA wiki](#). This Wiki is an online collaborative database and knowledge source of the UrbanA Community of Practice. It captured the project's learning process and is an important part of UrbanA's knowledge commons.

1.6 How to use this guide?

This guide provides theoretical underpinnings, practical instructions and scenarios of what a just arena could look like. This guide is not a blueprint: each just arena could and should be designed based on the type and state of a transition, local needs, capacities and available resources in your local and translocal context(s).

This guide is set up in such a way that each chapter could be read as a standalone. We hope it will inspire and empower you to embark on a similar journey, whether you want to organise a full arena process or a single arena-inspired workshop.



Group picture taken during the first UrbanA arena event in Rotterdam.

7 things that make a just arena distinctive from other participatory approaches

- 1. Transformative perspective and purpose:** the aim of the arena is transformative change at the systems level. I.e., challenging, altering or replacing dominant ways of doing, thinking and organising across functional domains (e.g., energy, mobility, health) and geographical areas (e.g., district, city, region).
- 2. Addressing justice and ecological issues simultaneously:** The arena recognizes and makes visible the needs and demands of vulnerable and/or marginalized individuals, social groups and communities, while at the same time living within ecological limits. It reminds social justice advocates of ecological challenges, and sustainability projects to bring justice issues to the forefront.
- 3. A movement of movements:** beyond being a multi-actor process and providing an interface for policy, science and practice, the arena aims to build a movement-of-movements. Therefore, an arena is locally rooted but connected to other scales and spaces. Learning therefore goes beyond transferring knowledge from context A to context B. It emerges from the interaction of different types of knowledge and perspectives on a specific topic.
- 4. Learning, connecting, and doing are integrated:** the arena is not only a place where people either talk or get things done, but also a place where learning, connecting, and doing go hand in hand and build on each other. In an arena we learn and reflect as to create actionable knowledge on how to transform cities.
- 5. Embrace the struggle:** an arena doesn't sweep difficult conversations under the rug but combines the critical and the constructive. As a place for contestation the arena combines prefigurative powers (developing new ways of doing, thinking & organizing) and countervailing powers (challenging & dismantling existing structures & institutions). The arena supports and enhances difference because that is where learning happens. Therefore, it inspires participants to step outside their comfort zones and allows things to get uncomfortable.
- 6. Welcome uncensored stories:** the arena provides an accessible and safe space for sharing mistakes, failed projects, obstacles, and challenges. Glorified stories and sugar-coated case studies bring us nowhere. Rather, learning from failure can be an opportunity to increase the transformative potential of approaches.
- 7. Not for profit:** The orientation of the arena is not for profit and is shielded from the dominant market logic in society, which means that different kinds of solutions and (indeed) problems are able and allowed to emerge. This includes opening to perspectives from a variety of disciplines, sectors, and backgrounds.



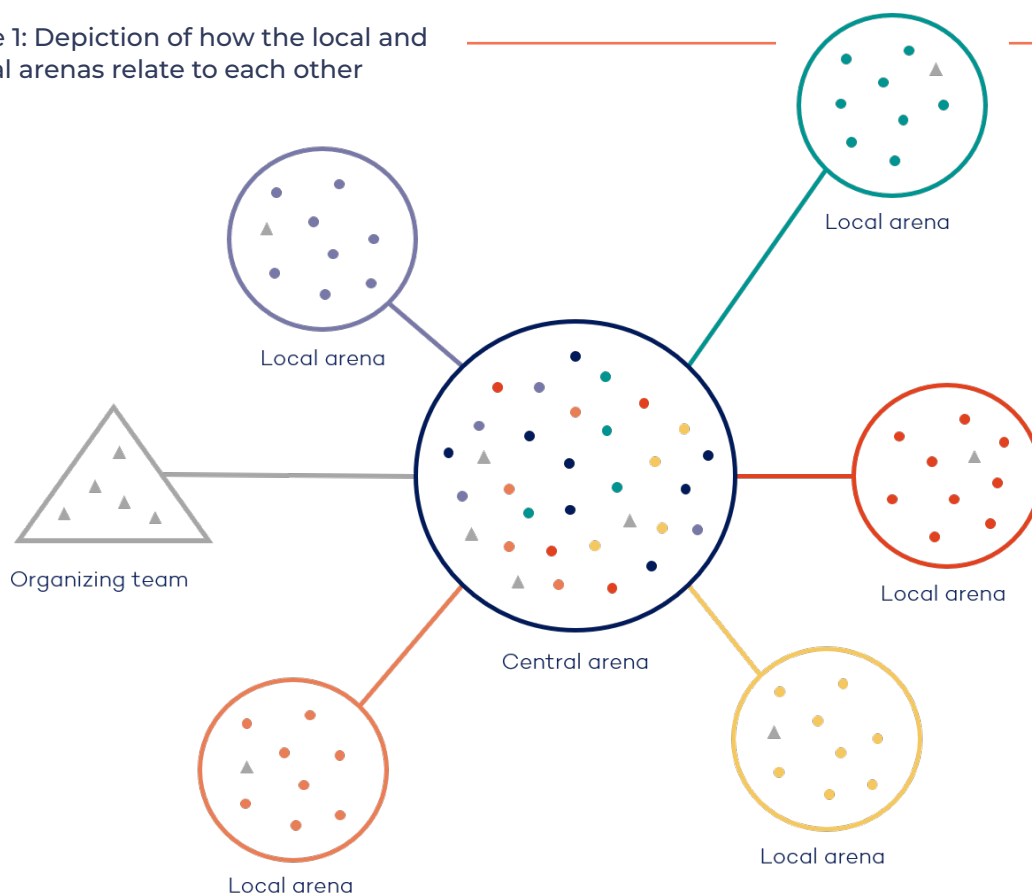
Picture taken during the first arena event in Rotterdam during the closing session.

Chapter 2

THE DESIGN OF THE JUST ARENA

The just arena consists of two levels: the local and central level. The central arena is where (ambassadors of) the local arenas and other participants come together (as is represented in figure 1). The emphasis of the local arenas lies on tangible action on the ground, while the emphasis of the central arena lies on exchange, translocal learning and acting on the supralocal level. The learning process at these two levels inform and inspire each other. The design is not static: for example the central arena might inspire participants to start a local arena process.

Figure 1: Depiction of how the local and central arenas relate to each other



A so called 'transition team' is responsible for organising the central and local arenas from A to Z (see textbox 1 below). Organising an arena process is a time- and resource-consuming and intensive task. Depending on the number of local arena processes one might decide to set up a transition team that coordinates the central arena and the overall process, and separate local transition teams that are in the lead of the local arena processes.

A transition arena combines the following four type of activities on both the local and central level:

- **Orienting:** mapping & learning from existing transformative innovations and creating a shared sense of direction and urgency
- **Agenda-setting:** developing a transition agenda of institutional breakthroughs that have the potential to accelerate transformative change
- **Activating:** connect to and challenge the status-quo and creating critical mass for transformative change
- **Reflecting:** creating space for social learning
- **Community building:** creating and strengthening connections between individuals and existing networks around a shared transition ambition.



Participant presenting the outcomes of a workshop during the first arena event in Rotterdam.

The transition team

The local and central arena events are facilitated by transition teams. A transition team ideally consists of 3-6 people. Setting up a mixed team with a diverse set of skills and competences is a must, because organising a transition arena involves lots of different type of activities such as:

- **Operational and logistical activities** such as sending out invitations, communicating with participants, arranging locations and food, creating zoom links, technical support.
- **Strategic and substantive activities** such as safeguarding the aims of the arena, drafting the agenda of the events, analysing, documenting the output, providing substantive input to the events etc.
- **Hosting and process facilitation activities** such as welcoming participants, hosting workshops, facilitating group discussions, presenting.
- **Networking and mobilising activities** such as mobilising and enthusing others, reaching out to relevant networks, keeping the community of practice engaged, connecting people to each other, social media activities.
- **Reflecting and monitoring activities** such as creating space for reflection within the team, evaluating the events, monitoring the aims and mission, feeding the lessons learned back to the team to adapt the design.

Tip: At the start of the process define roles, responsibilities, and time commitments for both the local and the central arenas. Divide tasks and responsibilities and assign a monitor who is responsible for the monitoring and evaluation of the arena process. Adapt the division of roles and tasks during the process when needed.

2.1 Orienting

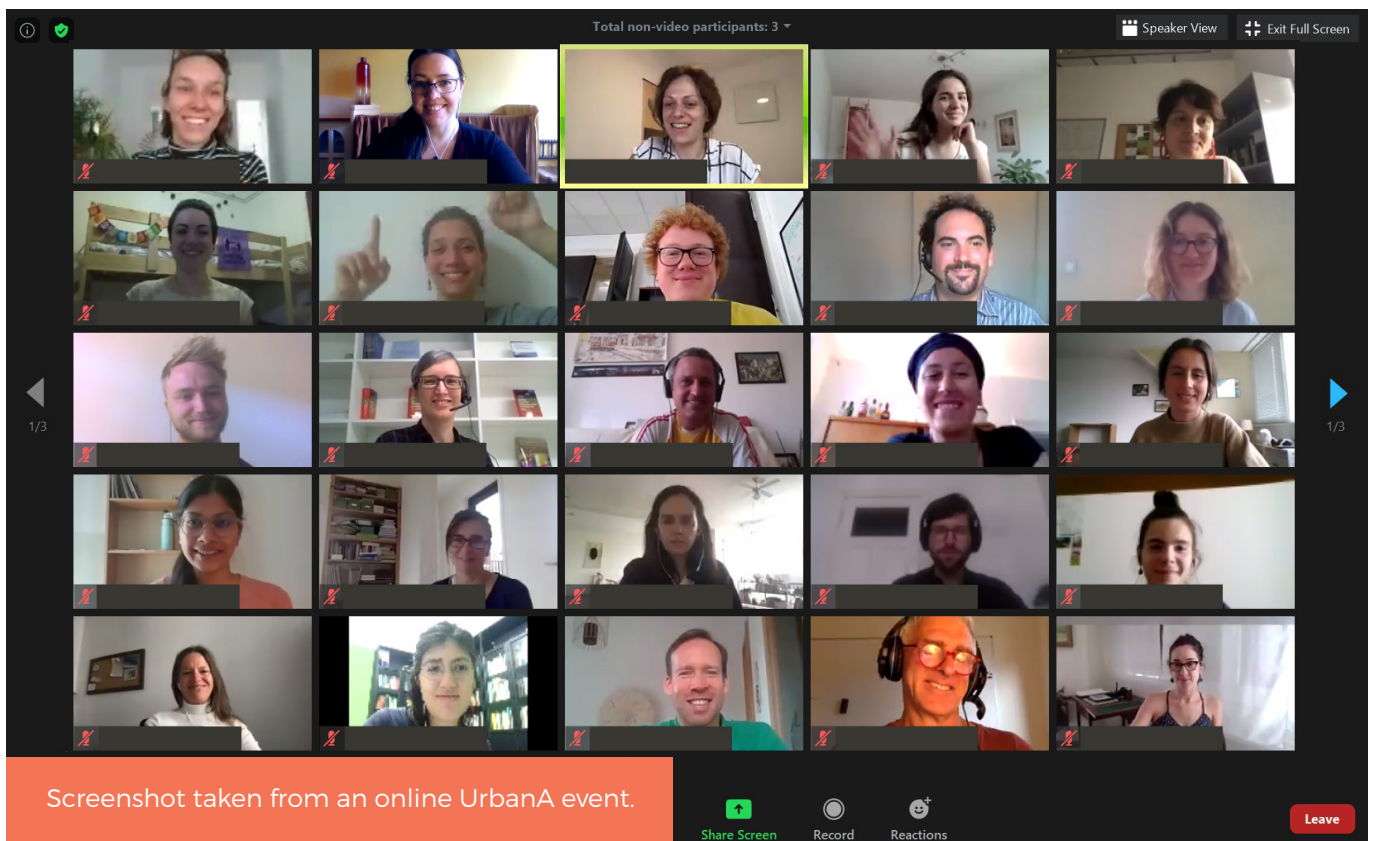
Mapping & learning from existing transformative innovations and creating a shared sense of direction and urgency

The overall aim of the orienting activity within the just arena is twofold. First the aim is to map and learn from existing (trans)local transformative innovations and drivers of injustices. It's about learning from their distinctive features while at the same time transcending the differences and finding common ground. Especially with regards to the radical core of these innovations and how they relate to dominant ways of thinking and doing, and dominant actors. Second, the aim is to enrich and integrate different future visions into a shared transition narrative about where we want to move away

from, and which drivers of unsustainability and injustice should be addressed. The goal is to develop a shared sense of urgency for transformative change. The central question is: what are our strategic goals and how can we collectively create (more and which type of) impact?

Key orienting activities:

- Map and learn from existing transformative innovations and drivers of unsustainabilities and injustices.
- Develop a collective transition narrative and strengthen a collective sense of urgency.
- Determine which type of collective goal and impact to strive for and how.
- Assess how to connect to the current status quo (e.g. in terms of a more conflictual and subversive or harmonious and constructive strategy).



Example of orienting activities in UrbanA

- Central to the UrbanA process was the development of a shared narrative and sense of urgency to forefront justice in talking about and working on sustainable development in cities. And the other way around: incorporate ecological issues within social justice movements.
- The transition team mapped 40 approaches to just and sustainable cities such as participatory budgeting and citizen science. These approaches were shared with and enriched by the Community of Practice in the first arena event in Rotterdam ([database of approaches in the UrbanA wiki](#)).
- The transition team distilled 10 drivers of injustice within sustainable development such as unfit institutional structures and unquestioned neoliberal growth and austerity urbanism. These drivers of injustice were shared with and enriched by the participants during the second arena event ([database of drivers of injustice in the UrbanA wiki](#)).

DRIVERS OF INJUSTICE IN THE CONTEXT OF URBAN SUSTAINABILITY



10 drivers of injustice in the context of Urban Sustainability, drawing by Carlotta Cataldi.

2.2 Agenda-setting

Developing a transition agenda of institutional breakthroughs that have the potential to accelerate transformative change

The overall aim of agenda-setting is to create a transition agenda of institutional breakthroughs that can accelerate transformative change on both the local and the translocal level. The central questions are: which alternative approaches need to be mainstreamed and how? What persistent institutional barriers such as legislation, funding schemes, protocols, paradigms etcetera should we tackle? The transition agenda is targeted at specific policy, legal & financial actors. It is focused on aligning the status-quo with transformative innovations. As such, the transferral of power and

resources is crucial to consider. Actions are identified and connected to how and who needs to do what to increase the pressure on the status-quo and to anticipate phase-out and break-down. This agenda might be directed to actors that are insufficiently connected to the transition narrative yet, but who are crucial to engage with.

Key orienting activities:

- Identify promising institutional breakthroughs that accelerate transformative change.
- Develop actions which connect interactions and translations between alternative approaches and the status quo, and that anticipate break-down and phase-out.
- Map and identify relevant policy levels and actors that need to be connected to the transition agenda.

Examples of agenda-setting activities in UrbanA

- The transition team developed a list of enabling so-called 'governance arrangements'. Enabling governance arrangements refers to all kinds of political and policy processes and settings that create space for transformative change. Such as creating a comprehensive vision of change ([database of governance arrangements in the UrbanA wiki](#)).



- The transition team has developed a list of 'policy keys' that have the potential to unlock just and sustainable cities. An example of a key is 'the economy benefits people and environment': "The economy of a sustainable and just city focuses on the creation of social, cultural, ecological and other forms of value that benefit people from all walks of life. The inclusive and fair allocation of resources ensures an economy that works for the common good. Production and consumption are organised so as to minimise negative externalities, cultivate non-consumerist values and reduce unnecessary demand. City-makers challenge inherited neoliberal narratives that overemphasize GDP growth, and are open to post-growth and post-capitalist approaches. This openness facilitates experimentation with socially and environmentally innovative concepts such as regeneration, care, sharing and solidarity." ([Keys to just and sustainable cities](#)).

Illustrations of the governance arrangements and keys, created by Carlotta Cataldi. Find all keys ([here](#)).

2.3 Activating

Connect to and challenge the status-quo and creating critical mass for transformative change

The overall aim of activating activities is to put the transition agenda into practice both on the local level and other supralocal scales. The focus lies on (creating the conditions for) mainstreaming and institutionalizing the transformative innovations on a more structural level by making them more resilient in challenging the regime. Additionally, these activities are aimed at building a critical mass of both innovative and (non) conformist actors that work on transformative change. E.g., by joining forces and actively reaching out to policy

makers, administrative bodies, and political actors. Also, these actions should anticipate the transition phase of phase-out and break-down. Depending on local needs and context the strategy for action might differ and could either follow a more harmonious or contentious approach.

Key activating activities:

- Translate the transition agenda to a strategy with concrete action points of how to achieve structural change.
- Mobilise relevant actors & create meaningful coalitions to implement actions.
- Lobby with relevant policy actors.

Examples of activating activities in UrbanA

- During the 4th arena event, the transition team invited several policy makers to join the session in which policy actions were formulated. In a crash test workshop, the proposed actions were reflected upon by those experts. The central question was: How to strengthen the actions in such a way that they 'survive' the policy context.
- The transition team brought together policy actors in a separate policy group with the aim to influence the conversation on how to integrate issues of justice in sustainability policy (read more about the policy group in intermezzo 5).
- As an outcome of the arena process and the 4th event, the transition team developed 'avenues for action' ([avenues for action](#)).

Urban Arena #4 Policy Action Final agenda



Thu **30 SEPT** 2021

Fri **01 OCT** 2021

Day 1 Setting the scene

- 9:00 - 9:45 Opening & formal networking
- 9:45 - 11:00 **Session 1: Sharing keys for the transition**
Guided tours and discussions
- 11:00 - 11:30 Break
- 11:30 - 12:30 **Session 2: Exploring the policy context**
Panel of perspectives and discussions
- 12:30 - 14:00 Lunch break
- 14:00 - 14:45 **Session 3: Defining what we mean by action**
Dialogue with live drawing
- 14:45 - 17:00 **Session 4: Taking stock of concrete action(s)**
World Café Workshop
- after 17:00 Optional networking

Day 2 Way forward

- 9:00 - 9:15 Intro to second day
- 9:15 - 10:45 **Session 5: Pitching in the arena**
Priority actions and crash test dialogue
- 10:45 - 11:15 Break
- 11:15 - 12:15 **Session 6: Triggering change**
Plenary of takeaway actions
- 12:15 - 12:30 Closing

Outline of the fourth arena event that focussed on policy action.

2.4 Reflecting

Creating space for social learning and developing an adaptive process

The overall aim of these above-mentioned activities is to foster the reflexivity of the arena and to nurture a culture of social learning. The focus lies not so much on learning from specific or singular experiments and how they can impact transitions, but on strategic learning on a translocal level and how the arena achieves structural and institutional change. This also includes the monitoring and evaluation of the arena process and

the different events that could result in an adaptation of the design. Reflecting and learning should be an integral part of the arena process and its activities.

Key reflecting activities:

- Provide space for translocal learning across contexts on how to mainstream and institutionalise.
- Evaluate different events and activities.
- Monitor whether the arena process fulfills the aims, mission & legacy that have been formulated in the beginning.
- Assess and adapt the arena design.

Examples of reflecting activities in UrbanA

- Reflection was integral to the UrbanA project and the CoP activities. Knowledge generated in previous EU-funded projects was distilled and synthesized into - among others - approaches, drivers of injustices, governance arrangements and keys towards just and sustainable cities. These were collected and shared on Wiki, and were a starting point for learning and reflecting together with the CoP.
- During the arena & CoP events, there was a strong emphasis on personal exchange between participants to openly discuss each other's experiences.
- During arena events and with the coco's we worked with open agenda's so people could bring in their own topics and needs (e.g., the open space methodology).
- Each arena event was evaluated with a survey and semi-structured interviews. This includes questions on how to create a safe space. The transition team used these evaluations to assess the aims, mission & legacy, and finetune the content of the events.



Picture taken during one of the parallel sessions of the first UrbanA arena event in Rotterdam.

2.5. Community building activities

Creating and strengthening social connections between individuals and existing networks around a transition ambition

The overall aim of the community building activities is to build and/or strengthen a movements-of-movements. It does so by stimulating social connections within the local and central arena and with a broader ecosystem of communities that share the same ambition or interest. Because of the translocal dimension of the just arena, it is important to facilitate an online space. Community building focusses on what is happening in between arena events and while the arena sessions are temporary interventions, the community that is build might continue to exist beyond the duration of the arena process. The level of engagement between the community and the arena might differ from person to person.

Key community building activities:

- Create moments for the community to meet beyond the arena events. For example, by organising community conversations or community learning sessions (e.g. as an interactive webinar) which are open to a wider audience.
- Create an open and digital platform that enables the community to interact, and to share or co-create knowledge.
- Participate in other events, conferences, festivals of the broader ecosystem of communities to share what has been developed within the arena and connect to and learn from other likeminded communities.
- Create a map or catalogue of the community so people know 'who is who' and how they could get in touch with each other after events.
- Communicate the outputs of the arena events and the insights that were generated towards the wider ecosystem of communities in a creative way (e.g., different tools and methods such as podcasts, visuals, drawings, videos etc.).



For some examples of community building activities, check out intermezzo's 4, 5 and 6.

Guiding principles for organising arena events

Ideally, the transition team defines the guiding principles of the just arena. These are the (adapted) guiding principles of the arena organised in the UrbanA project:

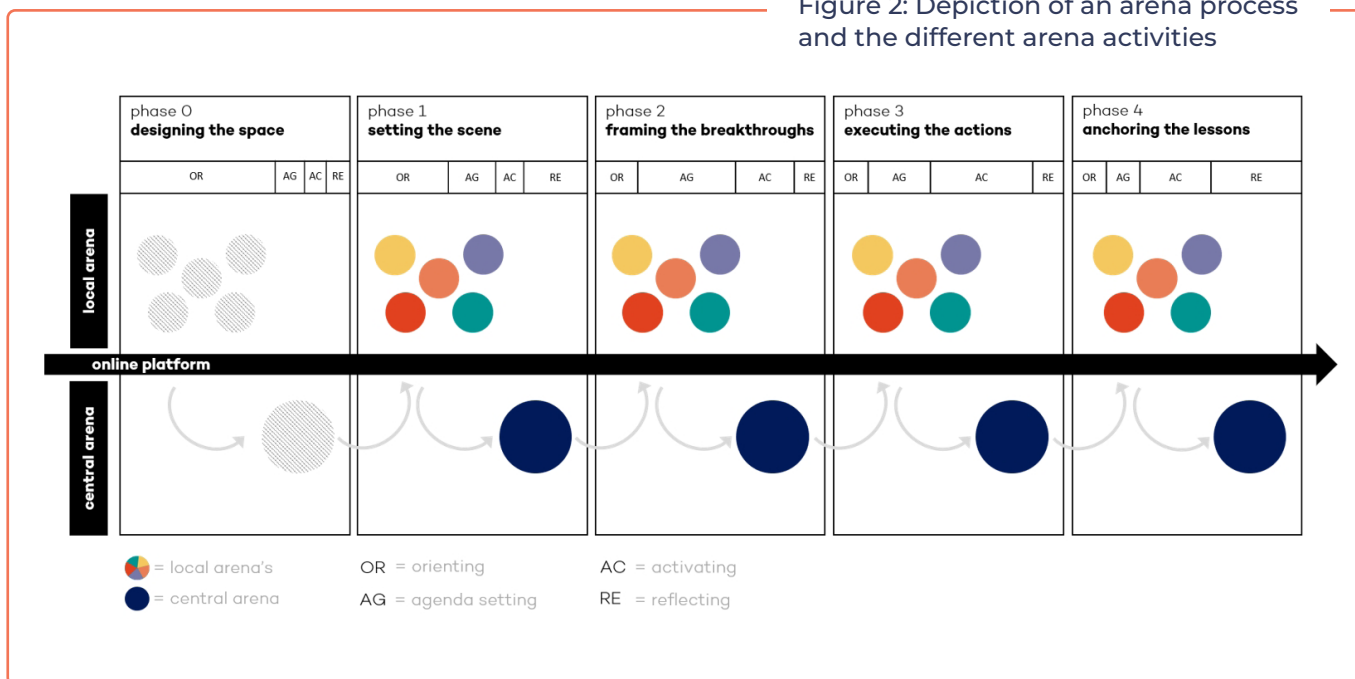
- 1. RADICAL** - strive towards creating spaces that allow for the emergence of alternative ways of relating, a type of dialogue, ideas and actions that are radically different from dominant ways of thinking, working and doing.
- 2. REGENERATIVE** - strive towards not only limiting the negative social, economic and environmental impact of the organisation of the arena, but to add value to economies, networks and cultures.
- 3. DIVERSE** - strive towards maximizing the diversity of participants with extra effort to engage marginalized groups as much as possible and specifically avoid reproducing existing mechanisms of exclusion and marginalization.
- 4. OPEN** - perceive knowledge as commonly owned, co-created by exchanging experiences and across context. The Community of Practice is supported to take ownership in co-designing and facilitating the events.
- 5. INTERACTIVE** - stimulate multi-actor interactions, translocal connections and collaborations through creative methods. Accommodate for multiple perspectives, experiences, and ways of being and knowing.
- 6. ROOTED** - Meet the participants where they are at. Start from their needs, dreams, personal motivation, and the issues right in front of them. Build upon and support existing local and translocal networks and innovations. Stimulate participants to apply their gained insights into their local context.
- 7. DECOLONIAL** - support the un-learning and dismantling of (neo)colonial and patriarchal ways of knowing and doing. Rediscover and restore the ways of knowing and doing that have been erased or forgotten by processes of rationalisation, industrialisation, neoliberalism, racial capitalism, colonialism. Decenter white/cis-gender/male/heteronormative experiences.

2.6 An adaptive process

In designing an arena process each phase or event might have a different emphasis in terms of these activities. For example, in the beginning an arena might focus more on orienting, while moving towards activating later. It is also possible to start with any of these - there is no inherent ideal order. In the figure below an example of a just arena process is visualized.

Likewise, the balance between local and central can differ for each event. In the Urbana project, the starting point and emphasis lay on the supralocal European level. For other contexts, it might be desirable to start more from the local context, asking what those local contexts need and what kind of translocal learning is considered most valuable.

Figure 2: Depiction of an arena process and the different arena activities



Participants meeting each other during the first Urbana arena event in Rotterdam.



Solidarity is one of the **17 keys** which can help city-makers in striving for just and sustainable cities.

How to make the just arena locally rooted? Experiences of the UrbanA Lisbon Hub

From the outset of the UrbanA project the Lisbon team attempted both to feed learning experiences and emerging ideas from the central arena back into their local community and to bring practical insights from Lisbon to the central arena. Thus, the so-called Lisbon Hub emerged out of the need to root the arena process locally. The aim of the Hub was to identify and connect local city makers, to better understand how to create sustainable and just cities, and to explore how best the needs of local Lisbon communities can be supported by the UrbanA Lisbon CoP. Other than the central arena in which many cities were talking together, the Lisbon Hub provided the space on the micro level for different people from different projects to talk to each other.

The initial Lisbon hub had over thirty city makers from the city come together some days before UrbanA's first arena event in November 2019 in one of the oldest and most multicultural neighbourhoods, Mouraria - which was then the epicentre of home evictions. The aim of the session was to explore how local needs relate with the UrbanA CoP. In the morning the group walked around the neighbourhood to listen directly to representatives of various projects and local struggles, to better understand the diverse perspectives. In the afternoon they did two collaborative sessions based on the questions: How to make Lisbon more sustainable and just? How can the UrbanA Community of Practice help to manifest the dream of a just and sustainable Lisbon?

From then onwards, in 2021 the Lisbon team developed a deeper relationship with three Community-led Initiatives from this local CoP: three projects working for social and ecological transformation in the neighbourhoods of Bela Flor, Ajuda and Marvila. They had four factors in common (detailed in this article) but the projects had little interaction amongst each other despite existing in the same city.

Some (not all) of the members of the Lisbon Hub participated in the central arena events. During these sessions the Lisbon Hub would either merge with other participants or they would participate in a separate break-out group as 'a hub'. Most of these sessions happened in Portuguese, to allow for greater exchange. Yet, engagement of the Lisbon Hub happened beyond the arena events.

The experience with the Lisbon Hub underlined the guiding principles of the central arena being 'rooted'. Meaning that it is important to really start from the local needs and personal motivation of the participants, to build upon and support existing local and translocal networks and innovations and to stimulate participants to apply their gained insights into their local context (see text box 2 in chapter 2).

Fuller reports on this event in Lisbon hub can be read in a short [book chapter](#), an [article](#) and on the [Wiki](#).



Renovar A Mouraria (Renew Mouraria) - Listening directly to views from the street (Crowley 2019).



Rua dos Lagares (Mills Street) - Lisbon's gentrification and eviction epicentre. (Crowley 2019).

Chapter 3

TWO ARENA SCENARIOS: SALLY & AMIT

In chapter 2 it was already stated that a just arena is an adaptive process where each phase or event might have a different emphasis in terms of these activities. To illustrate how an arena process could look like and what kind of results it could yield, we introduce two participants: Sally & Amit. We will follow them in their arena journeys from start to finish. Although Sally and Amit are fictitious, their experiences are based on our experiences in UrbanA.

3.1 Sally's arena journey

Sally is a local civil servant working on mobility justice and mobility poverty in a medium sized Northern European city. She has been working in the field for 10 years and has built a strong network both locally and in other European cities. Personally, she loves riding her bicycle through the forest. Sally recognises that her local government has put much effort and money into supporting the transition towards just mobility, mainly driven by the Paris agreement on climate, but

she observes that social innovations remain small and unthreatening to the status quo. She thinks policy relies too much on technology, big infrastructure, and efficiency instead of centering humans, small scale and local interventions and accessibility. She appreciates the projects that focus on sustainable mobility, but she is also critical of them: often these projects assume that they contribute to building a *just* city, but to Sally it remains unclear *how* exactly. Sally also notices that her colleagues in other European countries experience similar challenges. The projectification, solutionism and siloed way of working of local governments make it very difficult to really transform the mobility system and to center the voices and needs of historically marginalised communities.

Sally has a bold idea: she wants to bring together the local groups that work on mobility justice in her city and learn from the experience of similar groups in other cities. She wants to center local lived experiences and knowledge in such a way that it helps to mainstream those transformative actions that are really a 'bang for your buck'. She heard about 'the arena' from a colleague and she thinks that this approach might be exactly what she needs. She reaches out to two engaged colleagues, Vlad, a local civil servant in Eastern-Europe and Lucia who works in medium-sized Southern-European city. She shares her idea of setting up an arena with three local hubs. Vlad and Lucia are excited and together they write a proposal for a European fund that supports translocal Green New Deal projects. Six months later the three receive the great news that they won the grant. The newly formed transition team starts their arena journey...



Participant taking notes during the first UrbanA arena event in Rotterdam.

3.1.1 Exploring the process: transition team, design & participants

The first thing that Sally, Vlad and Lucia do is to expand the transition team with three other people from across Europe. Sally knows from previous experience that if you don't create a diverse team in terms of ethnic or cultural backgrounds, that it will be difficult to reach out to a diverse audience as well. Therefore, they invite a BIPOC community organiser, an experienced facilitator, and a researcher with expertise on mobility justice. Besides that, Sally, Vlad, and Lucia set up a local transition team that will support the local hubs.

Although Sally knows that an arena is supposed to be a co-creative and adaptive process that might change along the way, the transition teams set up an initial design of what the arena process could look like. They decide on the aims, mission, guiding principles and the focus of the arena: mobility justice in European cities. On a practical level they find additional funding for each of the local hubs. They also do some research: the team makes a visual map of what is already going on in the local hubs and on the European level, in terms of activities, activism, networks, etc. related to mobility justice. They reflect on how the arena process relates to all this. Finally, they carve out a process plan: in three years' time they want to organise 4 local and 4 central arena events. The local arena sessions will happen in person and the central arena sessions will be organised either online or blended. Mainly to avoid travel costs and CO₂ emissions. In between these arena events, they want to organise at least 1-2 community conversations to strengthen the Community of Practice. Sally would

really love to see this translocal community of activists, researchers, professionals working on mobility justice flourish and get stronger.

The transition team spends a lot of time brainstorming and deciding who they want to invite to the local and central arena. After drawing up an initial list of invitees they have a look at it again with the guiding principles in mind. They realise that the list mainly consists of the 'traditional stakeholders' that have been dominating discussion for years and isn't that diverse at all. They know that if they want to 'do things differently' they need to move beyond this group and 'walk the talk'. The transition team broadens their scope and agrees to prioritize members of communities, networks and organisations that have innovative and transformative power, that share the sense of urgency and/or people that experience mobility injustice. They put in extra effort to engage marginalized groups and avoid reproducing existing mechanisms of exclusion. The team also sets up an invitation and selection procedure, in which they asked themselves the following questions:

- Is the application process open or do you want to work with targeted invitations?
- Do you want to work with fixed selection criteria or have a more flexible approach to whom to invite?
- What are the selection criteria? What diversity categories matter?
- What are strategies for increasing or ensuring diversity of the group?
- How to deal with potential dropouts and no-shows?
- Who is responsible for the invitation and selection process?



Opening session during the first arena event with both online and offline participants.

Based on the actor analysis and an additional open call for applications, they invite the fellows, ambassadors, and participants to join the arena process. The transition teams agree that it is important to not only invite people to 'their arena' but also visit existing local communities and events to get more familiar with what is happening on the ground. They pick dates for the first events, send out invitations and start preparing...

3.1.2 Kick-off & setting the scene

The transition team kicks off the arena process with a session on the local level in all three cities. The aim is really to create common ground with regards to the aims of the local and central arena and to get to know each other as a community in a fun and informal way. That's why each city hub spends lots of time getting to know each other, deciding on the aims and personal dreams and intentions. Each local hub creates a vision of what a locally just mobility future looks like for them, they complement the map of the existing local innovations and collect the main drivers of injustice.

A couple of months later the first event on the translocal level takes place online. Vlad's team in Eastern Europe hosts this first event, so some of the participants meet in real life while others join online. Based on the local input brought in by the local ambassadors the translocal group deepens and elaborates the transition narrative that starts to emerge. They also brainstorm on the similarities and differences they recognize in the drivers of injustice across contexts. The transition team really centers mobility justice as a lived experience not as an abstract analytical issue: which makes the conversations

tense at times and brings to the front conflicting views, but that is what an arena is about. Sally is super excited about the visual harvesting of the designer they hired, which really captures the essence of the discussion.

Based on the evaluations of this first event, the transition team organises two online CoCos together with the Community of Practice. The first CoCo is a deep dive session into two drivers of mobility (in)justice that raised lots of discussion during the arena event. They also invite a PhD researcher - Emil - to share the insights from his research on the topic. For the second CoCo, the transition team invites three initiators of local mobility innovations to share how they (try to) challenge, alter or change the status-quo of the mobility system. Sally notices that this practical experience is a useful entry point into a discussion on what innovations support a radical transition and what not.

3.1.3 Framing the breakthroughs

Three months later the local hubs meet again. In these events they identify promising institutional breakthroughs that could potentially contribute to transformative change as a starting point for building a transition agenda for mobility justice. Because the time has come to really confront the status-quo, focus on mainstreaming the new and start anticipating breakdown of the old, the local hubs also map and identify relevant policy levels and actors that need to be engaged with the arena to move things forwards.

Sally, Vlad, and Lucia notice that it's quite difficult to come up with breakthroughs that are both actionable



Picture taken during the first arena event in Rotterdam during one of the parallel sessions.

Creating a diverse group of arena participants in UrbanA

Thinking of who you want to involve in what activity, why and how is one of the central efforts in the preparatory phase of an arena and an ongoing task. In the UrbanA project we worked with fellows and participants who were either specifically invited or selected based on an open call for applications. The Community of Practice sessions were open towards the public and worked according to the principle of self-selection.

Creating a diverse set of participants was always one of the main principles and starting points of the UrbanA project. Yet the selection process for arena participants evolved over time; it started from a loose and organic to a more structured and rigid process. The initial diversity criteria for including participants were based on institutional background, disciplinary background, sector/domain, gender, geographical, scale, and type of knowledge. This also resulted in the exclusion of certain participants because of the overlap and commonalities between possible participants (e.g., in region or institutional background).

These diversity criteria evolved over time, e.g., age became an additional criterion, but also the representation of marginalized voices (in terms of race, class, migration status, LGBTI community, physical disabilities, etc.). This latter criterion was especially challenging due to practical barriers (e.g., language barriers), but also due to the ambition of avoiding tokenistic practices. Some other barriers to including marginalized voices in the arena were: the arena is an unfamiliar and alienating setting, the arena discussions are out of one's comfort zone, and the arena meeting hours during daytime were inconvenient (i.e., were conflicting with other duties). From a participant's perspective, this led to questions such as: 'Why should I bend over backwards and do this? Or: Is something going to come out of this other than an EU output which is very abstract to me?'

Within the transition team different scenarios were discussed on how to get marginalized voices in: 1) don't put extra effort in for the inclusion of these voices, 2) do put extra effort in getting these voices in, 3) bringing in these voices indirectly (e.g. via

interviews, media or representatives), or 4) alter our approach and make an inclusive space as possible via different settings and methods. Although the wish was made explicit in the transition team to strive for the fourth option, in the end, it became a mixture of all four scenarios. Some additional activities were introduced, such as a buddy-format where fellows and participants could invite someone from their local context and use live transcription in online sessions. It was also discussed that rather than inviting marginalized communities to 'our' event, the transition team and fellows should go to meetings/events of communities (i.e., participating in existing events and then have the 'central' arena as an encounter to share those experiences).

The topic of how to include marginalized voices and develop a Community of Practice that is diverse in terms of race, gender, socio-economic status, religion, culture, etc. became a central challenge for the UrbanA project. One of the main questions we asked ourselves in facilitating the arena was: *How to avoid reproducing existing mechanisms of exclusion and include marginal voices in the process in a way that is meaningful to all participants?*

One of our main take-aways was that it is important to think of a diversity strategy from the start and that if your transition team is not diverse that it is quite hard to build a diverse Community of Practice. Or as one member of the transition team stated: *"If I were designing another arena, I would ask these questions to myself early on. Are we going to try to address that challenge? If yes, let's think right now about how that might go forward..."*

Based on our experiences making the arena network as diverse as possible, is an ongoing and collective endeavor and is never finished. Creating a 'dynamic space' for this dialogue is an absolute necessity. Allocating budget and roles can be a way to help with this ambition. It's not enough to see diversity as a tick off, but this needs to be integrally embodied during the process. We must commit to it. Not only prior to the arena process or in an evaluation, but before, during and after all events and activities.

and radical at the same time. That's why they decide to use the next central arena event for strengthening these actions and transition agendas. They decided to invite some new people to the arena event - that are somehow related to the transition agenda. Such as the policy actors that were identified by the local hubs. In this event they ask the group to identify challenges and opportunities on both local, national & European level that might hamper or support the local transition agendas. They focus on how to translate the innovative approaches to mainstream policy.

In the CoCos that follow they dive into different topics and perspectives that broaden their perspective on mobility. In one CoCo they talk about feminist and decolonial perspectives on mobility. In the other CoCo they talk about the mobility system from the perspective of children. These discussions in the CoCo inspire the local hubs to adapt their transition agenda by adding institutional breakthroughs from these three perspectives.

3.1.4 Taking care of the actions

In this phase of the arena processes it is all about getting into action. The local hubs and central arena divide into workgroups around specific institutional breakthroughs. Sally finds it important that participants decide for themselves what they want to work on based on what excites them personally instead of assigning actions. One of the groups for example focuses on mobilising other relevant actors and attend other events to share the work that has been done in the arenas. The transition teams notice that the local hubs need more time to get into action than was initially planned and feel the

need for peer-2-peer learning around practical cases. So, instead of organising one event for each of the local hubs and the central arena, the transition teams change their approach. They decide to facilitate a couple of extra sessions on learning across contexts, capacity building and sharing uncensored stories. Sally realises that these learning sessions help to increase the sense of direction of the CoP. She is excited to see how things start to move in the local hubs.

3.1.5 Anchoring the lessons

Realising that the arena is designed as a temporary intervention, the transition teams start preparing for the final events. Each local transition team prepares a timeline and learning history for their hub. These are the starting points of the last event in which they reflect on the journey so far and the actions they are trying to initiate and/or boost. The aim is to collect lessons learned and eye-openers with regards to working on a transition towards just mobility and what is further needed to institutionalise the desired change. Sally, Vlad and Lucia make sure these last events are also a festive moment to collectively celebrate what has been achieved so far. The participants commit to building on and disseminating the lessons from the arena. They do the same for the central arena. After the hubs they organise two CoCo in which they share the lessons learned with other movements.

3.2 Amit's arena journey

Amit is a young consultant working for a commercial firm in the field of urban development. They are an activist by heart and in their free time they love watching



Picture taken during one of the parallel sessions during the first arena event in Rotterdam.

movies and reading non-fiction books. Amit sees a gap between the world of policy, business & consultancies on the one hand and local communities on the other. They feel increasingly frustrated by what seems to them an unwillingness or inability of their company to look critically at the way it hampers or slows down change towards creating sustainable cities. Although on paper 'impact' and 'sustainability' are core values of the company. They find it difficult to put into words, but ask themselves: what if the money that goes to consultancy companies would directly go to communities or local initiatives?

Amit attended a webinar on 'the arena approach' and feels inspired by the spirit and underlying principles. They think that organising a full arena process would be too time consuming and unrealistic. Yet, like was suggested during the webinar, Amit feels the freedom to take some of the elements of the 'arena approach' and try them out within their company. Like throwing a rock in the water and then seeing what the ripples do...

With the approval of their manager, they bring together a small group of colleagues to organise a 24-hours arena session. It takes a while before the team decides on the goal of the 'arena' and they realise that they want to achieve too many things in a limited amount of time. In the end they decide that the goal of the sessions is to enhance a critical, honest and reflexive attitude towards the role of the company in transitions and to contribute to an open culture of discussion and deliberation within and between the different teams.

On a rainy afternoon, Amit and the 25 colleagues that signed up, meet in a community centre downtown.

The community has recently bought the building after a successful crowd-lending campaign. After a check-in in which they sit in a circle and share their personal motivations and dreams with regards to sustainable and just cities, they are taken on a little tour through the building by an older lady that has been part of the community centre for ages. The group is amazed by what is going on in the centre. Amit realises that the check-in itself is a radical act - when do they normally meet in a circle and take the time to listen and share what is on their minds and in their hearts?

After the tour, the team facilitates a world-cafe workshop based on the so-called X-curve. The X-curve describes the dynamics of societal transitions in terms of iterative processes of building up and breaking down. The model features both innovation and exnovation: it depicts both emergence and building up and breaking down and phasing out as important patterns within just sustainability transitions. In four brainstorming rounds they identify those structures, cultures and practices that need to be 'adapted', 'build-up', 'strive towards' and 'broken-down' in order to create just and sustainable cities. The workshop results in both a rich and messy collection of post-its. Amit notices that especially the discussion on what we need to let go of, is particularly relevant and comes with some tension and conflict. In a plenary discussion, based on the fishbowl method, they discuss how both the organisation and the teams position themselves on the X-curve. The main eye-opener is that lots of what they do as a company focuses on optimizing the status-quo. Time for dinner...



Picture taken during a blended parallel session during the first UrbanA arena event in Rotterdam.

In the evening it's time to get the creative juices flowing. They ask the group to imagine a sustainable and just future in their city - one that is radically different from now - and the role of their company in that future. Amit tries to create a really informal and fun setting - using music and festive lights. Their colleagues start with a small dance exercise to shake off the tiredness of the day. They've also invited a visual harvester and a spoken word artist who capture the output of the different groups in a nice visual and performance. It's amazing to see and hear what the groups come up with...

The next morning, they reconvene. In this last session Amit wants to synthesise all the input from the brainstorm and envisioning exercise and challenge the group to come up with five very concrete actions or steps they can undertake as a company to change their practice in such a way that it becomes more transformational. It's time to get serious. After a check-in, in which everyone shares what ideas or images of yesterday's session stuck most, the group breaks-out into a couple of smaller sub-groups for an hour. After that, each group is asked to pitch their top three ideas to the others. Together they make a selection of the actions that have priority and resonate most. They also assign 'careteakes' that will make sure that these actions are set in motion.

Amit is really happy with the result. In the 24-hours they have had a different conversation than they would

normally have. These conversations led to actual actions that his colleagues are committed to. A few months after the arena, Amit manages to secure funding to develop a tool for decolonising consultancy firms, which they develop together with communities who have suffered from extractive practices (e.g. being involved in temporary 'participatory' processes to not hear anything anymore for a long time). Soon after, Amit leaves the consultancy firm to lead a social movement on youth empowerment.

Not all actions are taken up on the short term, but they keep being picked up and being referred to throughout the years. Five years later, one of Amit's colleagues develops a consortium to design a tool which helps both the firm and its clients to decolonize their current sustainability practices.

3.3 Your own personal journey

The journeys of Sally and Amit are just examples of what (parts of) an arena approach could look like. As stated before, these steps and phases of an arena - and the decisions made - are not all clear-cut and self-evident. The design principles presented in this guide are open for interpretation. Also, the aspirations behind an arena approach can be really challenging and confusing to achieve. Organizing a space in which just and sustainable systems are pursued comes with dilemmas and struggles. It's your journey to face and overcome them somehow.



Unsplash / Robert Bye

Community building in UrbanA: the Community of Practice

In the UrbanA project our community building activities took shape in a Community of Practice (CoP). In this intermezzo we'll share our insights on building that community. We also share how we involved policy actors (in a policy group) and how we tried to provide an online platform for this community to exchange ideas.

Activity 1: The Community of Practice of UrbanA

In the UrbanA project the CoP was framed as: "an open network of individuals committed to taking constructive action on urban social inequality and ecological unsustainability in the ambition to create more just and sustainable cities" ([read more on the Wiki](#)). The type and level of engagement within this Cop differed: we distinguished between, the organisers of the transition arena (the transition teams), the fellows of the arena events, the participants of the arena events, the participants of our other CoP activities, followers and the policy group (read below).

The CoP engaged in different types of activities such as the Community Conversations (**CoCos**) and **side-events**. CoCos were online and interactive webinars or learning sessions aimed at reflection, learning & exchange. CoCos create the opportunity for the CoP to meet and follow-up on ideas in between the arena events. In this way it is also a low-key way to engage new people with the (output of the) arena process. The topic of the CoCos was decided on by the needs of the CoP which also presents and facilitates the sessions. An example of a CoCo in the UrbanA project was '[Feminist perspectives for sustainable just cities](#)'. When relevant we tried to create a link between the CoCos and the arena (and vice versa). Side events were moments when we as CoP participated in wider conferences, festivals and movements related to the topic of just and sustainable cities.

The first lesson of building the UrbanA CoP was that it is helpful to have a rough idea on what is the purpose of the CoP, where you want to go and how you want to get there. Although this might not always be clear beforehand and it is also up to the community to shape the aims and strategies along the way, setting

an intention will help you to anticipate opportunities that occur. For example, after the first arena event, there was lots of energy from the fellows to participate in the CoP, but we didn't really have a plan back then of what that CoP could look like and what could be the role(s) of the fellows.

The second lesson was that it was important to engage as a CoP in between the arena events and share outputs in an attractive way. The idea of the Community Conversations (Cocos) emerged from this need to stay in touch in between events. We also always tried to follow up immediately after events with sharing resources, minutes or pictures. The participants appreciated the different (audio-visual) outputs of the project (e.g. the graphic harvesting, the vignettes, the [podcasts](#), the [UrbanA Wiki](#), and the [videos](#)). These resources helped to create a collective understanding and narrative on urban sustainability and justice and inspired participants.

The third lesson was that it is important to be clear on expectations within the organising team. One of the discussion points within the UrbanA project was whether the CoP was 'successful' or not. Opinions differed because expectations differed. Some hoped it to become a strong and flourishing group of people that would manage to translate the insights into concrete actions on the ground. Those people concluded that the CoP 'didn't really take off' and 'we missed momentum' - and were thus disappointed. Others who saw the CoP more as a hybrid, fluid and loosely connected network of people, observed that people did form new connections, got familiar with the broader ecosystem of people working on just and sustainable cities and did take individual actions in their local context. All by all, it is hard to measure the impact of the CoP approach because these processes take time and in the end the future will tell. Also, the impact of the CoP might look small or be invisible (like a change of mindset), but that doesn't mean that it is not successful.

Fourth, we've learned that building a CoP that consists of a diverse group of participants requires an extra effort. The topic of how to include marginalized voices and develop a community of practice that is diverse in terms of race, gender, socio-economic status, religion, culture, etc. became a central challenge for the UrbanA project (see intermezzo 3). The participants appreciated the diversity of the CoP in terms of (professional) backgrounds and experiences, but missed the direct involvement of people with first-hand experience on injustices in relation to urban sustainability. Additionally, some considered the project too Eurocentric and remarked that we didn't sufficiently integrate issues of global social injustices and colonial patterns.



Participants writing their insights down during the first UrbanA arena event in Rotterdam.

Chapter 4

CREATING AN OPEN SPACE FOR LEARNING AND EXCHANGE

Organising a transition arena requires the use of workshop formats that enable transdisciplinary and translocal learning. It also requires a type of facilitation that creates an open setting in which participants feel welcome and comfortable to speak their minds and dare to be humble and doubtful.

4.1 Tips for organising and facilitating workshops

Below are a couple of workshop formats that proved to be useful during the UrbanA activities (e.g. Arena events and CoP). In appendix 1 we list a couple of action research and other methods that contribute to procedural justice.

The World Café methodology is a simple and flexible method used for facilitating collaborative dialogues for groups of participants. It is a creative process aiming at sharing knowledge and creating opportunities for action in groups of different sizes. The method builds on the notion of group intelligence and includes a number of discussion rounds where participants are invited to discuss a topic of mutual interest in small groups. The

technique enables bringing together individual ideas into one comprehensive message.

Interview Q&A with practitioners is a useful format to better understand different perspectives and experiences from local initiatives that actively work on transformative change on the ground.

Crash test dialogue is a format inspired by Hackathons and Climathons. External experts take up the role as coach and join punctually during the co-creation process to help the participants broaden or precise their understanding of the context, the problems, as well as the feasibility of the innovative tailored solutions. They bring friendly and constructive criticism to strengthen the participants' ideas and identify opportunities.

Participatory scenario building encourages participants to imagine being part of a specific context, present them with a complex problem and ask them to come up with a scenario on how to address the problems. E.g. in UrbanA participants were asked to examine the nature, potential



Graphic recording from Urban Arena #4 Session 3: "What do we mean by action?" by Carlotta Cataldi.

and pitfalls of participation in urban planning. Participants imagined taking up the role of council members of a local government seeking to initiate a participatory process with regards to the future of an abandoned patch of land. The aim was to identify the different conflicting interests and unintended consequences of participatory processes and to better understand the importance of carefully designing the process.

Open Space Technology (OST) is a method that enables self-organizing groups to deal with complex issues or questions in a short period of time (either in person or online). Participants of the session set the agenda themselves and follow four principles and one law. The four principles are: (1) whoever comes are the right people; (2) whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened; (3) when it starts is the right time; (4) when it's over it's over. The law is called the 'Law of Two Feet': If you find yourself in a situation where you are not contributing or learning, move somewhere where you can.

Field trips are excursions to real-world experiments or initiatives that work on transitions towards justice and sustainability. Field trips allow participants to gain firsthand experience, get inspired and learn from practitioners. As part of the UrbanA project, field trips were organised during the first arena event to 1) a community center supporting social integration, 2) a grassroots initiative that tackles food-waste in deprived neighborhoods and 3) an urban garden that focuses on health and sustainable living.

Deep dive talks are presentations on a specific topic by an expert and a facilitated discussion with the participants in an informal setting (e.g. after dinner). In UrbanA a deep dive talk was organised on green gentrification.

An open **fishbowl** conversation involves a small group of participants seated in the inner circle (usually 5-10 people) and a larger group of participants in an outer circle. The inner circle discusses the topic(s) while all other participants are seated in the outer circle(s) listen and observe. The inner circle has an empty 'guest chair'. If someone from the outer circle wants to join the conversation, she/he/they can occupy the empty chair and someone from the inner circle must voluntarily leave the fishbowl and move to the outer circle. If facilitated online, the participants could turn-on and turn-off their cameras.

4.2 Tips for organising and facilitating an arena event

Below a practical checklist is compiled with 12 tips for organising and facilitating pleasant and effective arena-events. This checklist is useful for online, blended and offline settings.

- 1. Consult your participants on their personal intentions and wishes and provide a clear purpose of the journey.** The transition team should be clear and explicit about the purpose of the overall process and of each session. It is also important to share how sessions are connected to one another. For example, by making it visual. This will make it easier for participants to contribute to the process. Dedicate time to collect the personal intentions and wishes of participants. In this way, you will be able to shape the process based on participants' needs and expectations and develop collective ownership. Allowing time and space to share personal intentions will also help to create trust.
- 2. Choose mindfully who to involve and strive towards diversity.** You need to take care of inviting speakers, presenters, coaches according to the best energy, enthusiasm, gender balance and diversity.
- 3. Diversify and alternate the type of sessions.** A great event is a balance between substantive and analytical on the one hand and informal and social activities on the other. And between open sessions and more structured and pre-cooked ones. The distinction between 'reflection, connection and action' helps to find the balance in setting up an agenda. Informal mingling is fun but is more meaningful when it has some direction (especially online). Besides that, try to alternate between plenary and breakout sessions. For example, start with a short plenary presentation followed by an interactive discussion and peer-learning in small groups (max 7 people). Avoid long webinar-style presentations as much as possible. A break-out session should allow enough time for participants to go in depth. Another idea is to make people return to the same group multiple times.



Blended session with online and offline participants during the first arena event in Rotterdam.

4. **Dare to disco dance.** Funny faces, stretching, dancing. Investing time in 'energizers' to let off steam, keep up the energy, ground yourself or regain focus is easily being dismissed or deleted from the agenda in favour of more 'important' agenda items. But those moments are essential and will positively impact the quality of the discussions and the bonding of the group. Don't let the blended/online dimension or the attendance of 'important people' discourage you, because energizers work great online, and everyone loves to get away from their desk and get silly.
 5. **Encourage participants to actively share their knowledge and experience.** It is fundamental to make clear that participants' contributions are very welcomed and important. Create different opportunities for them to bring in their knowledge and expertise, to set the agenda and potentially to facilitate sessions themselves. Some participants might be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the non-conformist type of sessions, so make sure to take them along in the 'arena philosophy'. Remember, in a blended setting online participants go first!
 6. **Use interactive tools and blended elements to your advantage.** Especially in an online or blended setting, it makes sense to utilize existing interactive tools to support the discussion. Think of Mentimeter, Slido, Padlet, GatherTown, Miro. Try not to overwhelm participants and keep the use of these tools simple and at minimum. Paradoxically, to meaningfully connect online, we also need to be offline. This is why online events need to include shorter sessions than in person events as well as more breaks. Integrate 'offline reflection walks' for participants to reflect on specific questions or lessons learnt as well as longer breaks. In a blended setting it's important to make sure that online participants see what's going on in the room. An idea is to ask co-facilitators and/or participants to connect via Zoom with their phones and visually report the session from different angles.
 7. **Keep it practical and make it visual.** Especially when dealing with complex issues or in theoretical discussions, it's important to include practical and concrete advice and real-world examples. For example, by inviting inspiring practitioners to participate and speak. Examples need to be original but also easily understandable. It also helps to make things visual. Make use of videos and images or invite a visual harvester to support the learning process.
 8. **Be mindful of (the type of) language and reserve budget for translations.** To ensure the accessibility of the events, avoid using jargon and becoming overly academic or policy oriented. Don't assume English is the preferred language. If possible, reserve money in the budget for translation of the output and the sessions or create multilingual sessions. The local hubs provide the opportunity to have the discussions in the preferred local language.
 9. **Make sure there is a shared sense of social etiquette.** Make sure the social etiquettes of the session are clear, shared and agreed upon by the group. This creates a safe container for meaningful connections and conversations to develop. This is especially relevant for online and blended meetings. Etiquette you could think of is 'be fully present', 'be flexible and trust creativity' and in the case of online settings 'treat it like a face-to-face meeting'. If preferred, these etiquettes could be co-created at the beginning of an event.
 10. **Make detailed operational scripts and templates and leave some buffer time and space to breathe.** Detailed operational scripts will help you to run a smooth and effective meeting which respects people's time. An operational agenda not only includes the objectives and outline of each session but also the roles of the facilitators. Clear templates with coherent questions are very helpful in engaging people. Add buffer space to be able to adapt to what pops up during the session and not having to 'cut' meaningful discussions because you're 'running out of time'. Planning in longer breaks is also a great way to ensure a relaxed day.
 11. **Define roles and responsibilities.** Facilitating an arena event includes multiple roles, especially in a blended setting. Roles you could think of are: overall program coordinator, time keeper, keeper of the heart, virtual hosts, chat monitor, presenters, facilitators, note-takers. Involve the participants if necessary. Also appoint facilitators and moderators during break-out sessions. Give them a task and instructions but keep it simple and clear. Ideally have an instruction meeting with all facilitators before the event to go through the operational agenda.
 12. **Follow-up to keep things flowing.** Don't forget to follow-up after an arena event when energy is still high, and ideas are fresh. Plan what you want to follow-up on before the start of the event and complement it with ideas that pop-up during the event itself. This also includes creating moments or places that support post-event networking.
- If you would like to learn more about how to organise online events, you can find more information in these blogs on the art of connect online: [blog #1](#) and [blog #2](#). Check out this guide for [virtual hosting](#). And this is another interesting [blog article](#) on how to organise blended meetings.

Community building in UrbanA: Creating impact with a policy group

Within UrbanA, a policy group was formed in order to create more (policy) impact, influence the conversation on how to integrate issues of justice in sustainability policy and translate the insights and outcomes of the transition arena into (supra) local policy agendas.

This policy group was facilitated by UrbanA partner ICLEI and consisted of policy actors who were affiliated with different policy institutions on different EU scales (local, national, regional), such as the European Economic and Social Committee, the European Committee of the Regions, the cities of Bristol and Antwerp and the European Research Executive Agency of the European Commission. Nine so-called **policy principles** were drafted. These principles were overarching EU-targeted policy actions and recommendations and were aimed at advocating policies for just and sustainable cities. The role of the policy group, as a sounding board, was

to reflect on the level of detail and type of principles that were needed to influence policy agendas.

In several working meetings with the policy stakeholders the group advised to make the draft principles more tangible and specific. For example, the focus of the principles could be sharpened not only in content, but also in target audiences (e.g. who needs to do what?). The result of this process was a list of actions that the participating and other policy organisations could initiate. The aim was to also get (in)formal consent on the developed principles as to further strengthen the advocacy level.

Such a policy group, however, should never be an end in itself. It is more an additional process of achieving impact which also requires the investment of political capital. In the case of UrbanA, it tried to do so by putting issues of justice on the agenda when it comes to sustainability policy.



Participant presenting insights from a session during the first UrbanA arena event in Rotterdam.

Chapter 5

CONCEPTUAL BUILDING BLOCKS OF THE JUST ARENA

The just arena is based on 5 conceptual building blocks:

1. Sustainability and justice as orienting principles
2. Transitions and transformative innovation
3. Governance and co-creation
4. Translocality
5. Matter of care

5.1 Sustainability and justice as orienting principles

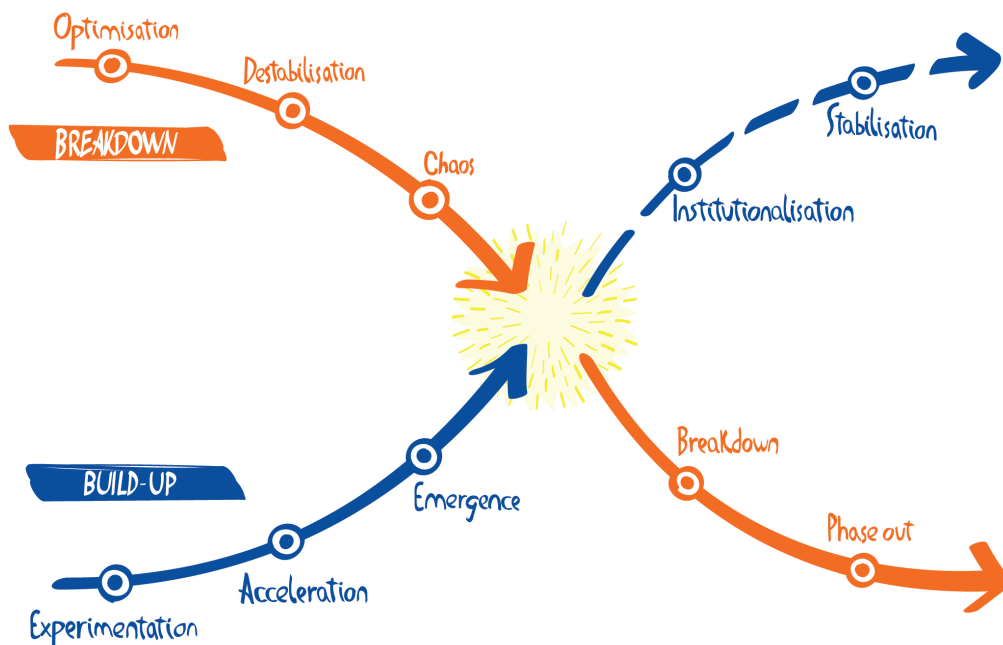
Our current systems harbor a wide variety of injustices and unsustainabilities, such as unequal access to affordable housing, healthy food and clean energy.

According to Castán Broto & Westman², who build on Agyeman et al.³, we can broadly characterize sustainable and just systems as systems that strive to:

1. improve the quality of life and well-being;
2. meet the needs of both present and future generations;
3. enable justice and equity;
4. live within ecosystem limits.

These conditions are ‘orienting principles’ to guide processes of societal transformation.⁴ By centering on the concepts of justice alongside sustainability, we emphasize that sustainable development is about

Figure 3: Transitions as iterative processes of build-up and breakdown over a period of decades. Also conceptualized as “the X-Curve”.⁶



Source: X-CURVE booklet. A sensemaking tool to foster collective narratives on system change (Silvestri, Diercks & Matti, 2022)

² Castán Broto, V., & Westman, L. (2016). Just sustainabilities and local action: Evidence from 400 flagship initiatives. *Local Environment*, 22(5), 635–650. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13549839.2016.1248379>.

³ Agyeman, J. (2013). *Introducing Just Sustainabilities: Policy, Planning, and Practice*. London: Zed Books.

⁴ Patterson, J. J., Thaler, T., Hoffmann, M., Hughes, S., Oels, A., Chu, E., Mert, A., Huitema, D., Burch, S., & Jordan, A. (2018). Political feasibility of 1.5 C societal transformations: the role of social justice. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 31, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2017.11.002>.

explicitly addressing processes of in- and exclusion in terms of, for example, ethnicity, race, income, age, gender, class, age and disability; the linkages across these categories, (i.e. intersectionality) and their impacts on different forms of justice.⁵

5.2 Transitions and transformative innovation

We build on transitions research, which is a relatively new, interdisciplinary field of research that focuses on processes of long-term structural transformation of societal systems. Transitions can be conceptualized as processes of build-up and breakdown over a period of decades (see figure below).

An important starting point of transition research is that current societal injustices and unsustainabilities are persistent and interconnected. To tackle these challenges we need systemic, transformative change.

We also need innovation, as distinct from 'transition', but it needs to be transformative innovation. If not, innovation can actually hamper systemic transition by adapting and optimizing existing structures.

We define innovation in the broadest sense as ideas, objects or activities that change socio-material relations, involving new ways of doing, thinking and organising.⁷ Innovation is transformative (i.e. it contributes to transitions) when it challenges, alters and/or replaces existing dominant social structures and institutions.⁸

5.3 Governance and co-creation

The transition arena methodology builds on the principles of a governance approach for sustainable development known as transition management. Transition management is based on theories of social learning, complex systems, sustainability science and network governance. It brings together different societal actors, networks, modes of knowledge, roles, and resources.

Transition management has been widely used for facilitating co-creation of knowledge and social learning among diverse societal actors. It has effectively

Examples of the arena-methodology in practice

Between 2010 and 2015 the arena method was applied in five different European cities simultaneously: Aberdeen (UK), Ghent (BE), Ludwigsburg (DE), Montreuil (FR) and Rotterdam (NL), as part of the MUSIC project. The aim of these arenas was to address climate mitigation in a sustainable manner.⁹

Between 2010 and 2013 three local community arenas were organised in three different local communities in Rotterdam (NL), Finkenstein (AT) and Wolfhagen (DE), as part of the InContext project.¹⁰ In Rotterdam the local community arena was organised in the neighbourhood Carnisse. The aim was to explore, strengthen and guide the self-organizing potential of the inhabitants.

Between 2015 and 2019, the arena methodology has been adapted and applied in Kampala (UG) and Dodowa (GH), as part of the T-Group project. The aim of these arenas was to empower community members in informal settlements towards building more sustainable and resilient communities, specifically with regards to urban groundwater.

In 2015 a mobility arena was organised in the city of Rotterdam (NL). The arena brought together a group of changemakers and supported them to draft an inspiring vision for mobility of the future and identify a set of concrete experiments that could be a katalysor for a sustainable city.

In 2019 a local transition arena was organised in a neighborhood in the city of Tilburg (NL). The aim of this arena was to strengthen the local network of citizens, professionals and entrepreneurs and develop transformative ideas and actions with regards to living and working in the neighbourhood. This arena was commissioned by the municipality.

⁵ Such as distributive justice (e.g. equitable distribution of material resources and services), procedural justice (e.g. participatory and democratic decision-making), and recognition justice (e.g. culturally inclusive practices).

⁶ Loorbach, D., Frantzeskaki, N., & Avelino, F. (2017). Sustainability Transitions Research: Transforming Science and Practice for Societal Change. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, 42(1), 599–626. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-environ-102014-021340>.

⁷ Avelino, F., Wittmayer, J. M., Pel, B., Weaver, P., Dumitru, A., Haxeltine, A., Kemp, R., Jørgensen, M. S., Bauler, T., Ruijsink, S., & O'Riordan, T. (2019). Transformative social innovation and (dis)empowerment. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change*, 145, 195–206. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techfore.2017.05.002>.

⁸ Haxeltine, A., Pel, B., Wittmayer, J., Dumitru, A., Kemp, R., Avelino, F., & Haxeltine, A. (2017). Building a middle-range theory of Transformative Social Innovation: Theoretical pitfalls and methodological responses. *European Public & Social Innovation Review (EPSIR)*, 2(1). <https://pub.sinnergiak.org/esir/article/view/51/19>.

⁹ See: https://drift.eur.nl/app/uploads/2016/11/DRIFT-Transition_management_in_the_urban_context-guidance_manual.pdf.

¹⁰ See: https://www.incontext-fp7.eu/sites/default/files/D4-1_Methodological%20guidelines_final.pdf.

supported governance for sustainability transitions in different domains (e.g. energy, food, mobility, water, waste management and education), and/or in specific geographical contexts (e.g. regions, cities, neighbourhoods). The transition arena is a central instrument of transition management.

5.4 Translocality

Translocality refers to the connectedness between different localities, not only across different spatial scales (e.g. national, regional, global) but also between different kinds of places (urban-rural, online-offline, present-future).¹¹

While many alternative approaches are locally rooted, they are also translocally connected in regional, national and global networks. It is this particular combination of local embeddedness and transnational connectedness that empowers actors to ‘persist in challenging, altering and replacing dominant institutions (...) despite of the unfavourable power dynamics’ that they face in their direct institutional context”.¹²

The transition arena methodology presented in this guide takes into account the translocal connections between different cities, regions and countries, but also between the local and global scale, between urban and rural, between the digital world and the offline world, between formal institutions and the grassroots level.

5.5 A matter of care

Lastly, care is needed in the creation of transition arenas. Care refers to all activities aimed at maintaining, continuing and repairing the web of life. It might be something we do (labour), something we feel (‘affect’) and something we advocate for (ethics/politics).¹³ It also refers to caring for the ‘radical core’ of all the transformative innovations that are taking place around us.

Care manifests in the way a transition arena supports translocal and social learning which includes creating regenerative time for informal encounters as a community. A transition arena creates an open and honest learning network and spaces that are grounded in participatory community-based methods. These methods are personal and interactive. In this way translocal learning gathers inspiration, motivation and builds solidarity.¹⁴



SHARING LOCAL LEARNING BRINGS TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

Illustration of one of the governance arrangements, created by Carlotta Cataldi.

Care is taken to be critical of how the arena process might reproduce the unequal power relations which it is actually trying to change. For example, historically marginalized voices and perspectives are centered. The transition arena strives to be inclusive, celebrates diversity and strives to acknowledge the invisible (emotional) work of pioneers and activists who address systemic inequalities.

Lastly, care manifests in the way the transition arena acknowledges the experience, values and knowledge that participants bring to the arena. It starts from the needs, hearts and ambitions of its participants. It focusses on mapping, cultivating and nurturing what they are already doing. Arena outputs belong to the commons.

11 Greiner, C., & Sakdapolrak, P. (2013). Translocality: Concepts, Applications and Emerging Research Perspectives. *Geography Compass*, 7(5), 373–384. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12048>.

12 F. Avelino, A. Dumitru, C. Cipolla, I. Kunze, J. Wittmayer. (2019) Translocal empowerment in transformative social innovation networks *Eur. Plan. Stud.* doi: 10.1080/09654313.2019.157833.

13 Puig de la Bellasca, M. (2017). *Matters of Care. Speculative ethics in more than human worlds.* Minnesota University Press.

14 https://urban-arena.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/822357_Deliverable_D5.2-Comprehensive-report-on-all-results-of-WP5.pdf.

Community building in UrbanA: The use of digital and open knowledge platforms

Developing a digital platform supports a continuous engagement of the CoP beyond the (arena) events and beyond traditional communicating outputs. Especially because of the translocal element, providing for a digital space for the different participants to interact and share and co-create knowledge is an integral part of the process. There are lots of existing platforms – both commercial and open source – that could support that need.

The choice of which platforms to use depends on the purpose and guiding principles of your process. Within UrbanA the choice was made to work with the Wikimedia software (next to more common platforms like Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, etc.) because it is open-source software that upholds a commons and decentralized approach to knowledge co-creation and information sharing. This resonated with UrbanA's modus operandi and the guiding principles. Which medium to use also depends on the project context. In UrbanA, we were, for example, not allowed to use Whatsapp because of EU project regulations.

In the UrbanA project we've experimented with different platforms and combined the use of our website, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Wikimedia software. From our point of view, the digital platform and social media should ideally go beyond one-way communication and sole dissemination of knowledge and output. In this way, social media becomes an engaging process, and the digital platform becomes

both an archive as a place to co-create knowledge. Participants have especially appreciated the various shapes and formats we've used to share knowledge and engage the community, such as the podcast.

Engaging people online in animated discussions and involving them in the knowledge co-creation on the Wiki was a continuous challenge. Although there was a need within the community to interact in between the arena events and beyond the CoCos it was a challenge for us to create a digital space that could support such a need. Especially given the fact that people have lots of other commitments and therefore often limited time or headspace to engage online. One of our main insights is that if the core group of the transition arena is not actively involved in the digital space, then the CoP will also not get involved. You cannot leave this to a couple of people, but really need to have the commitment of a bigger group to engage online. If this is not the case or not possible, then the expectations of the potential of these platforms should be lowered.

We still believe that experimenting with the use of digital platforms and social media has potential to support the emergence of a translocal CoP. Making it part of the arena design and start experimenting from the beginning onwards would still be our advice. As well as, deciding on who 'owns' and 'manages' these platforms as early as possible. This discussion kept popping up while working with the Wiki.



Picture taken during the first Arena event in Rotterdam during one of the plenary sessions.

Chapter 6 EPILOGUE

Triggered by the climate- and biodiversity crisis, housing crisis, persistent social inequalities (socio-economic, racial, etc.) and the pandemic, a variety of communities and networks are becoming more aware of the need for an intersectional approach towards addressing societal challenges and building a movement-of-movements in which sustainability and justice are sides of the same coin. Movements that realise that we need to resist short-term, short-sighted, technocratic 'solutions' that won't address the underlying causes, drivers of injustice and systems of oppression that have created power imbalances and inequalities in the first place.



Unsplash / Jon Tyson

In this sense organising a just arena is a radical act in itself, because the arena invites participants to take on a long-term perspective that focuses on transformative change. This is done not by rushing through a set agenda, but by taking time and space to reflect and learn and emancipate people to become caring ancestors and guardians of the web of life.

How to do this in your own context requires a localised and tailor-made process. As such, this guide can by definition never provide all that is necessary to organize a process like that. Organising an arena requires adaptation, translation and enrichment with local and contextual knowledge. This includes coming to a better understanding of how power inequalities manifest in lived experiences against the backdrop of transitions.

One of the things that make a just arena different from other approaches is that it *combines* a radical attitude with a caring one: nurturing the radical core of existing movements while at the same time dismantling and letting go of the status quo. This makes an arena both a joyful and a painful process to go through. It is in this combination that alternative avenues become possible.

Just Arenas

Guide for designing collaborative spaces
for just sustainability transitions



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