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Creating Change?

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Understandings among the Smart Civil Society Organizations Initiative

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Abstract

Facing interdependent, systemic problems such as resource depletion and climate change, recent civil society organizations' (CSOs) strategies seem to address only parts of the current challenges the world faces. Different and partly new modes of learning, organization and innovation are emerging on the agenda of several CSOs operating in the field of sustainability. The linkages in between the CSOs self-conceptualizations, their strategies and the environmental problems faced, are however fairly well understood. This research is located at the intersection of alternative paradigms and discourses linked to sustainability, their understanding as well as application by civil society organizations to enable change. Its purpose was to scrutinize civil society organizations' understandings of sustainable alternatives to the dominant socio-economic system of the 21st century and thus to contribute to a better understanding of the linkages and contradictions among these perceptions embedded in discursive and biophysical realities. This qualitative study was based upon fieldwork with the *Smart Civil Society Organizations Initiative*. Examined via observant participation, semi-structured interviews and document analysis, the key findings suggest that the ways in which problems, actions and strategies were approached within the initiative, depended first of all on the discourses, in which these were defined. Thus, the directions, in which the Smart CSOs Initiative took shape, were strongly bond by the participants' personal agendas, constrained or enabled by their organizations' mandates, but depended most of all on their ability to create a common understanding of each other's perceptions.

Key words: Sustainability, Civil Society Organizations, Agents of Change, Ecological Modernization, Great Transition, System Thinking, Environmental Discourses, Future Scenarios, Future Visions, Sustainable Alternatives



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1. Introduction

What's getting in the way is our global economic model and the hyper consumption that necessitates to keep itself alive. If we could actually say that – that would be really powerful. But what happens instead is that we get scared by the power of the machine that exists at the moment and get coopted into it and then trying to make the machine a little bit better (Interview 2)¹.

Civil society is often described as a key actor of society, or an agent capable of enabling societal change² (Finlayson 2005: 108; CSCP 2010: 7; Levy & Eagan 2003: 805-806; Global Scenario Group 2002: 49). This thesis makes a contribution to further scrutinize this argument by applying it to the case study of the Smart CSOs Initiative. My focus will be on the ways in which the civil society organizations (CSOs) participating in the initiative understand themselves as actors and knowledge producers engaged in reinventing the understanding and practice of sustainability.

This study is thus located at the intersection of alternative paradigms and discourses linked to sustainability, their understanding as well as application by CSOs to enable change. In particular, the thesis analyzes the discourses and the biophysical reality surrounding the Smart Civil Society Organizations Initiative and its different understandings of sustainability. As a basis for this thesis I draw on an understanding of sustainability described by Escobar and Paulson (2005: 270) who define it as the “integral and multidimensional character of the practices of effective appropriation of ecosystems” by correspondingly recognizing cultural, economic and ecological dimensions of phenomena. Any phenomenon or process we perceive occurs through the lens or understanding of ourselves as human beings, which links the

¹ This thesis uses a name-substitution system, which is further delineated in section 4.3.

² In this research I regard an actor as any person or people possessing agency, understood as the “socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 2001: 112). This also includes groups of actors as for instance CSOs, governments, media, etc.



understanding of sustainability essentially to the ways we comprehend ourselves. Ehrenfeld's notion of sustainability as “an outcome of the way we choose to live our lives” (2008: 8), underlines this perspective and the creative perceptions that can be entangled in alternative paradigms linked to sustainability.

However, in the current organization of global society, consumerism rather than sustainability has become a cultural paradigm, as consumerism is “dominant in many parts of the world and across many cultural systems” (Assadourian 2010: 8). It has become a “cultural pattern that leads people to find meaning, contentment and acceptance primarily through the consumption of goods and services” (Assadourian 2010: 8). Especially, in many rich nations of the world consumerism has become “a way of life and an ideology” (Schor 1998: 217).

In my understanding, consumerism – as referring to both consumption and production – is highly correlating with the discourse of infinite economic growth on which the current capitalist system³ is based. As Jackson argues for “the last five decades the pursuit of growth has been the single most important policy goal across the world” (2009: 5). Similarly, Rogall reasons that there is an overrepresentation of economic interests in public debate due to the considerable larger amount of personnel and financial resources that businesses and trade associations possess compared to other actors of society. This in turn has led to a dominance of neoliberal positions in the public sphere (Rogall 2004: 40). That stands in line with Hornborg's argument that there are “extremely powerful interests at stake” “who have very much to gain [...] from the current organization of global society” (2009: 238).

From this perspective achieving change seems challenging. However, as argued by Meadows paradigms can be seen as the second most powerful place to intervene in a system, right next

³ Within this thesis, the expression “the system” is used synonymously with world systems understood as “comprising core, semiperiphery, and periphery” (Abel 2007:56). They are as Abel continues “material and energetic self-organizing systems that are multiple-scaled in space and bounded in time, exhibiting complex dynamics that includes pulse, collapse, cycle, and chaos” (2007: 56).



to the insight that no paradigm can claim to contain absolute truth (1999: 19). Drawing on Kuhn’s influential thoughts on paradigm shifts in science⁴, Meadows underlines that in order to change paradigms active change agents are needed (Meadows 1999: 18).

1.1 The Object of Study – Civil Society Organizations and Change

This thesis’ object of study is the initiative ‘Smart Civil Society Organizations – Effective Change Strategies for the Great Transition’⁵, a consortium bringing together about 100 experts from various civil society organizations, several representatives from governments, private organizations and academia from different countries in a *community of practice*⁶ aiming to create more effective CSO strategies towards a sustainable economy and society (Smart CSOs 2010).⁷ The Smart CSOs Initiative was initiated by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)-UK⁸ and supported by the UNEP/Wuppertal Institute Collaborating Centre on Sustainable Consumption and Production (CSCP) Germany⁹. The overall objective of the initiative is to explore “the collective knowledge of leading thinkers from academia and civil society to develop and define an agenda that will help CSOs to create new strategies that will be more effective in tackling the environmental crisis and working towards a sustainable economy and society” (Smart CSOs 2010). My fieldwork of the Smart CSOs Initiative was based on a triangulation of qualitative methods including document analysis of primary and

⁴ Thomas Kuhn 1962. *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁵ In brief, the term Great Transition has been adopted by the Tellus Institute’s Great Transition Initiative (<http://www.gtinitiative.org/>). More details on the meaning and usage of this term can be found in the chapter 2. and 3.2.3.

⁶ The term community of practice is situated at the core of the initiative but implies different meanings for the participants. A more elaborate discussion on its meaning will follow in the analysis chapter. As a working definition it can however be understood as an opportunity arena that offers space and time for the participants to think about and discuss ideas, concerns, practices etc. which they perceive as vital for themselves, their organizations and/or the connection to the Great Transition.

⁷ A comprehensive description of the initiative follows in chapter 5 after having established the theoretical framework and conceptualizations vital to understand the project.

⁸ <http://www.wwf.org.uk/>

⁹ <http://www.scp-centre.org/home.html>



secondary sources, observant participation as well as semi-structured interviews. The phenomena studied encompass a spatiotemporal frame dating back to the 1980s and continuing to the present, within the European context of the Smart CSOs Initiative. They include the individual representatives of the organizations, and also the organizations themselves. These two categories are not seen as mutually exclusive analytical entities, but as interacting phenomena.

1.2 Scope and Purpose of the Research and Analysis

Given the fact that continued economic growth linked to persistent resource extraction cannot continue relentlessly due to the finite biocapacity of the planet (Meadows 1972; Global Footprint Network 2010), a change of the status quo is inevitable. This is seen as a fact among certain actors of society, but not among others. When analyzing these lines of argument from a discursive perspective, it is vital to stress that they are embedded in certain environmental discourses. Thus, whichever discursive perspective one takes, the question arises how future human systems might look like. Within the realms of this thesis, I apply a political ecology approach that explicitly emphasizes the existence of both discursive practices and the biophysical reality, in which discourses are embedded. How this biophysical reality is expressed or described is certainly framed within discourses. This however does not mean it cannot exist beyond human cognition. It is thus an essential aim of this thesis to recognize and contextualize different perceptions of the future that are expressed through different discourses in the Smart CSOs Initiative without neglecting their biophysical reality.

As mentioned before, my thesis focuses on the ways in which civil society organizations perceive themselves as vital actors and knowledge producers engaged in reinventing the understanding and practice of sustainability. For instance, in the context of UN climate negotiations Roberts and Parks state that “the single best predictor of treaty ratification is the number of NGOs in a country” (Roberts & Parks 2007: 209). Many CSOs’ actions contribute



to moving beyond one-dimensional perspectives of sustainability, and some try to approach multiple dimensions and positions. This stands in line with Escobar's understanding that

sustainability is inextricably entangled in the construction of alternative production paradigms and political orders; they are elements of the same process, and this process is advanced in great part through the cultural politics of social movements and communities in defense of their cultural models of nature (2008: 103).

My study is thus situated at the intersection of alternative storylines¹⁰ linked to sustainability and the ways in which CSOs are engaging in these for enabling change. Central to my research is thus the assumption that the ways in which the CSOs participate in the Smart CSOs Initiative shapes their and correlates with their approaches of aiming for change towards the Great Transition. Hence, it is of particular interest to analyze how these CSOs collaborate, how they exchange and communicate knowledge among themselves and with other key actors of society such as governments, academia or businesses, i.e. how they understand themselves and others. In other words drawing on Hajer's thinking, the kinds of solutions or strategies utilized to address perceived problems, "depends first of all on the way in which these problems are framed and defined" (1995: 4). Thus, an analysis of the understandings of these CSOs leads to a better comprehension of possible gaps between theory and practice and adds to the relevance of this thesis.

¹⁰ In this thesis, Hajer's definition of storylines is utilized, which he defines as "narratives on social reality through which elements from many different domains are combined and that provide actors with a set of symbolic references that suggest a common understanding" (1995: 62). A more explicit delineation of how this is implemented follows in chapter 4.2.



My research objective resulting from the supposition above is:

- To receive a better understanding of how CSOs view themselves and others, their strategies and knowledge as well as their perceptions on change by examining the storylines, discourses and networks in which CSOs operate

Derived from the above, I formulate my research questions as follows:

- What are the underlying beliefs and discourses that shape the ways in which knowledge generation, communication and collaboration in the Smart CSOs Initiative are constituted?
- How do the CSOs understand change and sustainable alternatives and themselves in this regard?

The thesis' structure is organized around key contents and emerging themes, which are vital in order to answer the research question posed. After having introduced the Smart CSOs Initiative and delineating the thesis's purpose, objective, and key questions, chapter two offers a demonstration of the research background, in which this thesis is embedded. In chapter three I discuss key concepts essential to the research and introduce the theoretical context as well as analytical model, which serve to scrutinize the Smart CSOs Initiative. In the fourth chapter, the methodological approach, methods as well as their critique are outlined. Subsequently, chapter five focuses on the presentation of the research results, which I then analyze in chapter six. Key findings are discussed in the conclusive sections in chapter six and a reflection upon the research results follows in the concluding remarks.

2. Research Background – Imagining Sustainable Alternatives

Several organizations have elaborated on different perceptions of the future and some have created different scenarios of how future human systems might be constituted – among them



the Global Scenario Group¹¹ (2002). Based upon different worldviews embedded in discourses, these future scenarios emphasize different areas and systems that will address current environmental, social and economic problems. Among these scenarios are four, which the Global Scenario Group examines further. One scenario describes the belief in invisible “*Market Forces*” (2002: 17) as proposed by Adam Smith (1776), which will solve the problems at stake. Another scenario focuses on “*Policy Reform*” emphasizing the need for a “strong policy guidance“ of the market to address economic, social and environmental problems (2002: 17). A third scenario draws on the belief that “social polarization and environmental degradation” (2002: 18) will result in a “Fortress World”, characterized by hierarchical systems and “social polarization” (2002: 18). The fourth scenario is described as the Great Transition focusing on “sustainability as a progressive global social evolution” (2002: 17) which in turn results in a world with characteristics such as “human solidarity“ and new ways of living (2001: 17).

I want to emphasize that it is not within the scope and purpose of this study to further delineate the likelihood or development of these scenarios, but to highlight the assumption that parts and parcels of these and possible other future scenarios are being imagined among the initiative’s participants, which are embedded and expressed within different discourses. This I perceive as essential when analyzing the CSOs’ understanding of change. Furthermore, these scenarios are vital as the Smart CSOs Initiative especially utilizes one of them, the Great Transition. This is particularly noteworthy as civil society and engaged citizens are perceived as central change agents within the Great Transition scenario (Global Scenario Group 2002: 49). My research takes two opposing assumptions of future perceptions into consideration, which are surely simplified and normative, but vital to delineate in order to understand the scenarios and discourses in which the participants of the Smart CSOs Initiative are embedded.

¹¹ In 1995, the Global Scenario Group was established by the Tellus Institute and the Stockholm Environment Institute “to engage a distinguished and diverse international group in an examination of the prospects for world development in the twenty-first century” (Global Scenario Group n.d.).



One vision is the humanely influenced or not influenced creation/development of alternative, sustainable models of the organization of societies and economies, which are in balance with the biophysical realities in which they are embedded. This could include incremental as well as external systemic change. The substantial characteristic of this vision (or visions) is that the majority of people worldwide perceive it positively with regard to their livelihoods. The other vision displays the rapid decrease of the ability for all people to sustain their livelihoods, whether this includes a breakdown or a continuation of current economic and social systems. The eminent feature of this vision is that the majority of people would describe their situation as negative with regard to their livelihoods. I reason this with the awareness that neither of these two future visions is or can portray the humane perceived reality in any way. On the one side, it is not possible for human beings to describe how the future will be. On the other side, there will always be disparities in terms of livelihoods, distribution of matter and resources, power, as well as in the perceptions people have about these disparities. However, what I want to hypothesize is that parts and parcels of these future visions can be found in the underlying beliefs, attitudes and values of those who engage their thinking and actions in sustainable alternatives. It is these imageries that I find vital to be aware of in order to understand the perceptions of change and sustainability within the Smart CSOs Initiative.

These possible changes of the current cultural, economic and financial systems could be transitions into different systems: they could be incremental to the system or these changes could include both dimensions. Yet, as stated above, I reason that some kind of transition is quite likely to happen (and most probably is already happening), which is closely interlinked with social and cultural change as societies and cultures have to adapt to their biophysical realities. Accordingly, any transformation would also be a matter of cultural and social adaptation. Whether or not and to what extent humans will be able to actively engage in these processes of transformations thus become a question of human culture and imagination. At this point, the Smart CSOs Initiative steps in and it becomes explicit why I emphasize the significance of understanding the participants' perceptions on this change. A major part of the Smart CSOs Initiative is concerned with conceptions of how such a cultural and social



transformation could look like and how it could be practically implemented. Since there are different actors involved in the initiative, it seems very important to better understand how the participants view the initiative and themselves in it.

On various global and local levels, a growing number of CSOs, governments and businesses¹² seem to support or communicate multiple approaches to aim for different understandings of sustainability, but profound changes on macro- and meso-levels towards the active exploration of alternative models of societies and economies appear to be missing. This apparent theory-practice gap could be better understood by closer examining the collaboration of different actors of society. Studies have shown that there is often a discrepancy between existing theoretical knowledge of sustainability or sustainable transitions created by different actors of society and their practical implementation (Action Town 2009; Carrington et. al 2010, Harich 2010, Rogall 2004). By scrutinizing the perceptions among the Smart CSOs Initiative this discrepancy might be better understood.

3. Theoretical and Analytical Framework

In this chapter I firstly offer a historical contextualization of the object of study and the literature review, followed by the delineation and definition of core concepts essential to the research. The chapter then closes with a discussion about the ways in which the utilized political ecology approach is fruitful in understanding CSOs perceptions as change agents and sustainable alternatives.

¹² This argument is based upon the increasing and often diverse use of the term sustainability within the last years. Examples of organizations engaging in the discussion around sustainability can be found among many key actors of society, such as CSOs (e.g. Transition Network 2010, GSG 2002, nef n.d, etc.), governments, (e.g. several UN bodies, such as UNEP n.d., CMEPSP n.d., etc.) or businesses (e.g. WBCSD 2011, MBDC n.d., etc.)



3.1 Historical Research Context and Literature Review

The thesis started out with the question of change and the inquiry on who is perceived as agent of change within human-environmental relations. This section displays a brief literature overview relevant to this notion as well as the question how this is related to sustainability, transitions of current systems and the respective discourses, in which they are embedded. In a second step, a historical contextualization of the discourses surrounding sustainability and environmental understandings follows. However, throughout this thesis relevant literature reviews and critiques are tied in wherever suitable and reasonable. The notion of change is almost ubiquitous in academic literature one could say. Especially in the field of social change, various scholars from different disciplines are concerned with this concept. This ranges from the disciplines of social sciences such as sociology and political science to humanities such as anthropology, history or philosophy. The literature I have chosen focuses on most recent publications about change related to CSOs, relevant literature from the field of human ecology and political ecology as well as publications important to the Smart CSOs Initiative.

With regard to global socio-environmental change and sustainability several scholars apply a world-system perspective such as in Hornborg and Crumley's anthology (2007). In addition, analyses of flows and networks in relation to socio-environmental change began to increasingly evolve in the 1990s as Mol delineates (2010: 71). For instance, Escobar (2008) and Sassen (2006) are drawing on assemblages to understand socio-environmental phenomena. In the realm of societal change many publications focus on social movements, activism and international networks such as Smith (2008) or Keck and Sikkink (1998). Philosophical perspectives on environmental thinking and change can be found in Dobson (2007), Ehrenfeld (2008) as well as Leggewie and Welzer (2010). Within the field of political science, sociology and others, scholars such as Giddens (2009) have provided insights in the politics and power dimensions behind environmental crises, such as climate change.



These scholarly concerns with the notion of change, sustainability and human-environmental relations are, as I contend, simultaneously entangled with the evolvment of environmental discourses.

Regarding CSOs' involvement in the discussion on sustainability on a global scale, traces of their engagement could be traced back to the 1980s, when the term was initially utilized as part of what Dryzek would characterize as the “sustainable development discourse” (2005: 145). One of the first to define sustainable development was the Brundtland commission in 1987, referring to “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (UN 1987)¹³. In recent times, sustainable development is often criticized for sustaining the system of economic growth dominant in the 21st century (Daly 2008), which is not sustainable with the Earth's resources (Global Footprint Network 2010).

In essence, as Dryzek points out, the views on what sustainable development means “differ as to what human needs count, what is to be sustained, for how long, for whom, and in what terms” (2005: 146). In line with this thought, Buttel, Hawkins and Power argue that the dominating environmental discourse in the 1980s had changed from “Limits to Growth to Global Change”¹⁴ in the 1990s (1990: 57). Currently, as briefly delineated in the lines above, I argue the discourse around global environmental change is still dominant at the beginning of the 21st century, but it was supplemented with new approaches of how to tackle environmental problems at stake. For example, instances of system thinking applied in academia, connected to action research on the level of organizations seem to increasingly

¹³ This definition had been significant for the first United Nations Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, in which NGOs had only a consultative status, but during which they were involved in a simultaneously organized NGO Global Forum (UN 1997). As Dryzek argues, the UN had however not been the first one to utilize the term. The concept is also found in the discussion about “renewable resource management” as well as when sustainable development was a “radical discourse for the Third World” (Dryzek 2005: 145).

¹⁴ The discourse of global change strengthened, as Mol underlines, “the old idea of global ecological interconnectedness” (2001).



emerge (Burns 2007). Furthermore, studies on leadership and sustainability can be found, as for instance Brown's study on "Conscious leadership for sustainability" (2011).

3.2 Delineation of Core Concepts

The discussion of concepts essential to this research is not only a means in itself, but serves to describe key linkages that exist between these concepts and different usages from the perspective of the Smart CSOs Initiative, my research and the discourses surrounding them.

3.2.1 Civil Society Organizations

In order to offer a concise definition of my understanding of civil society organizations I discuss the following concept of CSOs, which was utilized in the context of a European survey. Since the research phenomenon is located mainly in Europe, this is analytically advisable with regard to the European context of the initiative. For the purpose of this study, I utilize Kohler-Koch and Quittkat's definition of civil society to delineate what I understand of civil society organizations. They are

all those voluntary and non-profit organizations which play an important role in giving voice to the concerns of citizens and in delivering services that meet people's needs. Civil society [organizations] include [...] the following: trade unions, employers' and producers' organizations; non-governmental organizations representing general interests such as environment, human rights, social welfare, health and culture; professional organizations and grass-roots organizations (2009: 14).

This definition of civil society organizations attributes a dimension of general interest to CSOs. In this research, I conceptualize general as relating to the common interest of civil society as a whole. However, with regard to CSOs operating on certain contentual fields, such



as environmental CSOs, general interest obtains a thematic dimension. Thus, CSOs are understood as any kind of non-profit and non-governmental organization that are organized with regard to respective thematic fields, in which they define what general interest means to them. The concept of civil society organizations is often interchangeably used with NGOs (non-governmental organizations), also within the Smart CSOs Initiative.

As Kohler-Koch and Quittat's definition above demonstrates, even though NGOs are often distinguished from other civil society organizations such as trade unions, all of them are considered to be CSOs. For the purpose of this research, I thus define NGOs as a sub-category of CSOs. In addition, I understand both terms as referring to non-governmental, non-profit organizations with operating offices and staff in one or more countries, which are representing their members' interests. In the Smart CSOs Conference background paper a definition of CSOs from the LSE Centre for Civil Society¹⁵ was adapted, referring to

a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. CSOs are often populated by organizations such as registered charities, developmental and environmental NGOs, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, trade unions, social movements and civil society advocacy groups and coalitions (Narberhaus 2011: 4).

The use of this definition underlines the rather open understanding of CSOs in which the conference discussions found its starting basis. This is partly due to the wide contentual scope of the project, but also due to the variety of organizations participating in the project. In order to analyze this common, but open understanding of CSOs, Edwards' view of civil society is fruitful. He perceives civil society as an ecosystem in which different organizations promote

¹⁵ LSE Centre for Civil Society: <http://www2.lse.ac.uk/CCS/home.aspx>



“collective goals, cross-society coalitions, mutual accountability and shared action-learning” (2009: 30).

3.2.2 Agency

Examining CSOs as agents of change requires a conceptualization of agency. Being both, object and tool of the research itself, its definition is vital in understanding the research phenomena and other interconnected concepts. Ahearn’s definition of agency as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 2001: 112) serves well as a working definition for this thesis. Agency is thus not solely something that people can obtain, but that is mediated to them in socially and culturally conveyed ways and structures, which in turn are reinforced or altered by agency (Giddens 1979: 49-51; Ahearn 2001: 117). This adds a power and time dimension to the concept of agency and stresses the need to examine the discursive and physical surroundings of the CSOs and its members researched. Another aspect is underlined by Gezon when drawing on Ahearn to underline that “agency, or the ability of an individual to act, emerges within specific contexts and cannot be considered as ontologically prior to action itself” (Gezon 2005: 148). The Smart CSO Initiative takes place in various geographical and discursive contexts and in addition, the initiative’s organizers view it as an instrument to find out how agents capable of creating change can be strengthened (Smart CSO 2011a: 1).

Finally, Ahearn’s comprehension of agency as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 2001: 112) is supplemented by the subsequent notion on agency from Escobar. He emphasizes that agency is the ability to create “places as strategic possibilities” (2008: 357), which adds the significance of place to the potential of a person to act. It also underlines the importance of movement from a certain discursive stage and/or biophysical reality to another. Thus, I understand agents as a person or a group possessing this capacity to act by creating “places of strategic possibilities” (Escobar 2008: 357). This leads to the conceptualization of how change is referred to in this study. Political ecology approaches often move beyond



methodological and theoretical descriptions and enter the area of “recommendations for action” (Paulson, Gezon & Watts 2005: 30). I am applying a political ecology approach, which underlines the “search for practical solutions to social-environmental problems” as Paulson, Gezon & Watts delineate (2005:31). This search is part of my methodological and analytical research process, which is in turn as Paulson, Gezon and Watts argue “affected by larger economic and political systems as well as discursive and cultural constructions of the environment” (2005: 31). Analytically, within the scope of this research, I understand change as transitions against or towards more sustainable structures of societies and economies. Besides its theoretical usage, change is an essential part of the research phenomenon itself, being highly interrelated with the term Great Transition utilized by the initiative in “Effective change strategies for the Great Transition” (Narberhaus 2011).

3.2.3 Great Transition

The Smart CSOs Initiative has adopted the understanding of the term Great Transition from the Tellus Institute’s Great Transition Initiative (Narberhaus 2011: 12). The Global Scenario Group (2002), consisting of the Tellus Institute and the Stockholm Environment Institute had initiated the term Great Transition and it has been utilized by other organizations such as the New Economics Foundation (Nef n.d.¹⁶). With the term Great Transition, the Tellus Institute describes a future scenario, which aims to “advance a global civilization of sustainability, equity and well-being through research, education, and action” (Tellus Institute 2009). The term Great Transition is often being related to the term Great Transformation initially described by Polanyi when delineating the political and economic dimensions that societies in Europe (mainly England) underwent during the rise of the market economy (1944). Different scholars and activists utilize the terms Great Transition or Great Transformation and one could argue that this takes place at a certain discursive level. For instance, Leggewie and Welzer perceive the Great Transformation as one towards “low-carbon societies” (2010: 1).

¹⁶ n.d. = no date available



Others such as Speth (2008) and Gell-Mann (2008) further delineate the demographic, technological, economic, social, institutional, informational, and ideological dimensions of this transformation.

3.2.4 Discourse and Language

Knowledges¹⁷ are being shaped and interchanged in various discourses. Dryzek defines discourse as “a shared way of apprehending the world” (2005: 9). Hall is drawing on Foucault’s definition of discourse, referring to it “a system of representation” (2001: 72) in form of statements, which are claimed to be true at particular moments in history (Hall 2001: 74). Discourses, according to Dryzek, contain assumptions about different understandings of the world, i.e. how different people “construct meanings and relationships” (2005: 9). Discourses are intrinsically linked to power as they “condition the perceptions and values of those subject to them” (ibid: 9). It is, however, vital to emphasize that in this thesis discourses do not solely relate to the realm of language, but also, as Hajer points out, to the “institutional dimension of discourse, considering where things are said and how specific ways of seeing can be structured or embedded in society at the same time as they structure society” (1995: 263). Discourses are thus connected to language as a “form of social action”, as Ahearn defines it (2001: 110), through which they are communicated. This interconnectedness of knowledge, language and discourse is vital in understanding how the practices and perceptions of the Smart CSOs participants are correlating with the different scales of their thinking and actions.

¹⁷ Even though the plural of knowledge does not exist grammatically, using it stresses the multiple and heterogeneous nature of human ecology and political ecology, which I want to point out in my paper. There is not one singular knowledge, but there is rather a plurality of knowledges with the help of which humans understand themselves and their environments.



3.2.5 Ecological Modernization

There is a vast amount of literature about the idea, theory and discourse of ecological modernization as Mol (2001: 56-58) has comprehensively delineated. Among the first ones to name the term ecological modernization were Jänicke (1984; 2008) and Huber in the 1980s (Hajer 1995: 25; Dryzek 2005: 167), but, as Huber underlines, related ideas have also been debated and developed in different realms in the 1990s (2004: 21). More recent publications are anthologies such as Mol et. al (2009)¹⁸.

In this research I particularly utilize Hajer's concept of the reflexive ecological modernization discourse (1995: 280) and Dryzek's discussion of strong ecological modernization (2005: 173-179) as focal points to analyze the Smart CSOs Initiative from different perspectives. Whereas Hajer underlines the "technological innovation and economic development" (1995: 25) in Huber's and Jänicke's understanding of ecological modernization, Hajer himself understands ecological modernization as "the discourse that recognizes the structural character of the environmental problematique but none the less assumes that existing political, economic, and social institutions can internalize the care for the environment" (1995: 25). In contrast, Hajer views the "ideal of reflexive ecological modernization" as a "democratic process of deliberate social choice out of alternative scenarios of development (or indeed non-development)" (1995: 280). The challenge then is, as Hajer concludes, to "think of an organization of ecological modernization as a process that allows for social change to take place democratically and in a way that stimulates the creation of an – at least partially – shared vision of the future" (1995: 280).

¹⁸ Mol lists some scholars, who are critical towards ecological modernization from the sphere of social and environmental studies, such as Vandana Shiva or Wolfgang Sachs, who claim that ecological modernization is "only applicable to industrialized societies, because it largely disregards the issue of an equal distribution of natural resources among different groups and nation-states" (2001: 65).



In order to utilize Hajer's concept of ecological modernity and reflexive ecological modernity, it is vital to understand his usage of and thinking on reflexivity. This he derived from Beck's concepts "risk society" and "reflexive modernization" (Hajer 1995: 36), whose work also helped Hajer to conceptualize "tools to differentiate between different sorts of eco-modernist practices" (1995: 36). According to Beck risk is "the modern approach to foresee and control the future consequences of human action, the various unintended consequences of radicalized modernization" (1999: 3). Risk society, as described by Beck is then – as opposed to the industrial society – a society in which the "gain in power from techno-economic 'progress' is being increasingly overshadowed by the production of risks" (1992: 13). In other words by the means of reflexive modernization "industrial society destabilizes itself through its very establishment" (1992: 14). In the context of the risk society the objective of modernization has shifted, as Hajer denotes drawing on Beck, "from the distribution of wealth and the mastery of external threats to the management of dangers that are the inherent by-product of industrial society itself" (1995: 36). In short, in the risk society "the flip-side of progress, the unwanted side-effects and externalities of industrial society, become a central concern" (Hajer 1995: 36). In which ways these understandings of risk and society are entangled in the Smart CSOs Initiative participants' thinking becomes a central question when analyzing it through the lens of ecological modernization.

Furthermore, the term reflexivity is significant for this thesis in different ways. On the one hand, it is inherent in Beck's understanding of modernity and society in which, as Hajer denotes, he sees reflexivity as the "self-confrontation of society or unintentional self-endangerment" (Hajer 1995: 40). On the other hand, Hajer in contrast to Beck, perceives reflexivity as "a relational notion that should be seen as a quality of discursive practice" (1995: 40). In addition, I perceive reflexivity as an essential part of system thinking, which is both inherent in the analytical dimension of my research as well as in the research phenomena themselves.



3.2.6 Narrative

Lastly, it is vital to discuss how I understand the term narrative within this thesis as the initiative's participants are exploring what narrative(s) means to them and the Smart CSOs Initiative. Narratives are “social constructions about specific cases” (Benjaminsen & Svarstad 2008: 51). A narrative can be understood as “a cognitive structure or way of making sense of experience, as a type of text [...] and as a resource for communicative interaction” (Herman 2009: 73). Within the realms of this research, I want to emphasize this interactional character of a narrative because it is the collaborative understanding and negotiation of such narratives about specific cases which also distinguishes it from a discourse and from Hajer's concept of storylines, which is further delineated in section 4.2.

3.3 Political Ecology Approach

Political ecology has demonstrated to be fertile in studying the Smart CSOs Initiative, as it puts emphasis on the multiple perspectives of understanding phenomena. Furthermore, I argue that change towards alternative paradigms connected to sustainability is intrinsically linked to power, drawing on Agrawal's reasoning that processes “around the environment always involve power/knowledges and subjectivities and are always mediated by institutions” (2005: 203). CSOs – being institutions themselves – are taking part in knowledge and power production, which lies at the basis of resource distribution. In this aspect my research aligns with Martínez Alier's description of “political ecology as the study of distribution conflicts” (Escobar 2008: 6). In the analysis, especially Escobar's discussion and understanding of assemblages and networks will be utilized. He describes assemblages as “wholes characterized by relations of exteriority” meaning that its components demonstrate “capacities to interact with other entities” (2008: 287). Escobar also argues that

through their participation in networks, elements (such as individuals) can become components of various assemblages operating at different levels. This means that



most social entities exist in a wide range of scales, making the situation much more complex than in conventional notions of scale (2008: 287).

When transferring this idea to the Smart CSOs Initiative, it is essentially the aspect that the collaborators are part of “various assemblages operating at different levels”, which characterizes the dispersion and interconnectedness of the initiative. A central advantage of political ecology compared to other approaches of scientific inquiry is its emphasis on interdisciplinarity that offers space to create a synthesis of knowledges. Yet above all, political ecology is deeply entrenched in the question that, as Escobar and Paulson argue, “speaks of the utopia of reconstructing the world in an ecologically sustainable, socially just, and culturally pluralistic manner” (2005: 274).

Additionally, this political ecology framework draws on and incorporates other theoretical stances often found in political ecology approaches: system theory, world-systems analysis, and assemblage theory. System theory is vital with respect to the multi-scale analysis of political ecology as it underlines the importance of research phenomena as being wholes in itself and parts of larger integrative wholes (Escobar 2008: 291). In addition, system thinking is also a key content of the Smart CSOs Initiative (Smart CSOs 2010). System theory is intrinsically linked to world-systems analysis (Wallerstein 2004), in which world systems are understood as “intersocietal networks where the interaction is an important condition of the internal structure of the composite units and generates change in these local structures” (Gassón 2007: 163).

Lastly, with regard to system thinking and world system analysis, Geels’ meta-theoretical model, the multi-level perspective (MLP) (2002), is important to mention, as it demonstrates one of the theoretical foundations of the Smart CSOs Initiative. Based on evolutionary economics and technology studies, Geels developed an analytical model to describe technological transitions (2002) and later on included social science perspectives to also analyze socio-technological (2004) as well as sustainable transitions (2010). In the MLP



Geels distinguishes between the macro, meso, and micro levels of systems that interact with each other. In specific, Geels describes the macro level as sociotechnical landscapes, understood as an “external structure or context for interactions of actors” (2002: 1260), referring to “[m]aterial environments, shared cultural beliefs, symbols and values” (2004: 913). Geels utilizes the term landscape to refer to “relative ‘hardness’” of these arrangements in society and underlines that they are “beyond the direct influence of actors, and cannot be changed at will” (2004: 913). On the meso level he designates socio-technical regimes defined as “semi-coherent sets of rules, which are linked together” (Geels 2004: 904). Examples of these are technological, science, policy and socio-cultural regimes. Science regimes include for instance research programs, procedures and paradigms and policy regimes administrative and legislative regulations. The micro level then refers to socio-technical niches, which are the spaces in systems for the “generation and development of radical innovations”, (2002: 1261) as not all rules from the regime level are yet solidified (Geels 2004: 913).

4. Methodological Approach

My research aims to incorporate both constructivist and realistic stances within a political ecology and discursive research framework. This includes a methodological approach focusing on a holistic interpretation based on concrete description that might in parts lead to more abstract reflections or generalizations.

My involvement in the initiative began with an internship at the CSCP from July until September 2010. From August onwards I became part of the Smart CSOs Initiative and also the Smart CSOs Conference Organizing team. This included the collaboration in the facilitation of the launching process of the Ning¹⁹ platform, the co-hosting of the opportunity

¹⁹ Ning is a social network service online allowing people to create their own social websites and forums (Ning 2011) (<http://www.ning.com/>).



area group “A New Narrative,” and the preparation of draft versions of this opportunity area in the conference background paper²⁰ for this opportunity area. In addition, I served as one of the facilitators throughout the whole conference in London, especially in the discussion group on “A New Narrative”, in which my main task was to summarize the discussions in a form that makes it useful for the group to work upon the content beyond the Smart CSOs Conference.

For the purpose of the transparency of my research, I am aware of my role as a collaborator of the Action Town Project²¹, and the Smart CSOs Initiative, of my role as being part of the organizing team, as well as of my role as a researcher examining these projects, and thus of the different perceptions about the initiative this includes. Whereas this can be seen as a disadvantage from one perspective, from another, it can be viewed as a central advantage being able to examine the data as a whole by combining the insights from these different roles²².

4.1 Analytical Model

This research can be seen as a study of specific discourses, narratives, actors, networks and assemblages, which correlate and shape the biophysical reality of the research phenomena. Svarstad offers an insightful methodological approach of political ecology in her study of bioprospecting. She argues that “it is sometimes useful to begin with the global features of a phenomenon” as “the ways in which an issue is treated in global discourses often provides an

²⁰ The conference background paper is called “Smart CSOs Effective change strategies for the Great Transition Five leverage points for civil society organisations” (Narberhaus 2011).

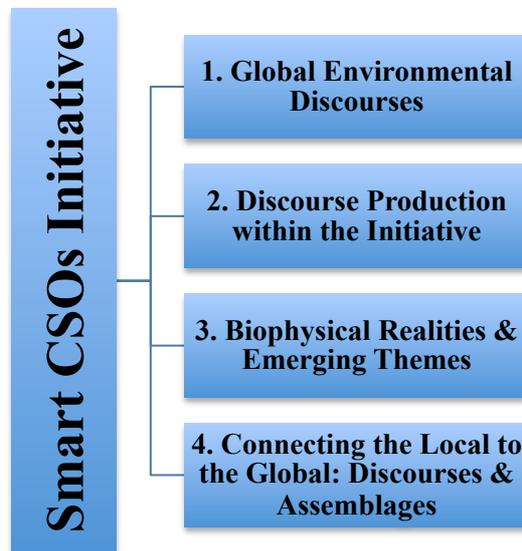
²¹ Action Town is a project funded by the European Commission within the FP7-framework program, which encompasses two year funded projects (http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/home_en.html).

²² Escobar underlines the challenge of being a researcher and participant with the following quote: “There is always a close connection between social reality, the theoretical frameworks one uses to interpret it, and the sense of politics and hope that emerges from such an understanding. One’s hopes and politics are largely a result of the particular framework through which we analyze the real” (2008: 284). By not neglecting, but emphasizing this notion, I emphasize to act within scientific trustworthiness.



important context for interpreting specific cases on the local level” (2005: 239). Her four level analysis from the global to the local perspective is very useful for my research, because the Smart CSOs Initiative is not located in one specific area, but rather occurs in the realms of different countries on bi- and multilateral levels and in virtual as well as non-virtual spaces. However, it does constitute a biophysical reality, for instance at the Smart CSOs Conference in London. In addition, the way in which Svarstad combines discourse production and narrative analysis by locating these in a political ecology approach is a fruitful example of how to analyze the discourses, in which the Smart CSOs Initiative is based. However, as demonstrated in figure 1²³, the analysis will apply an altered version of Svarstad’s concept to contextualize vital aspects of the Smart CSOs Initiative on each level of analysis as opposed to solely scrutinizing it in step three.

Figure 1: Four Level Analysis of the Smart CSOs Initiative



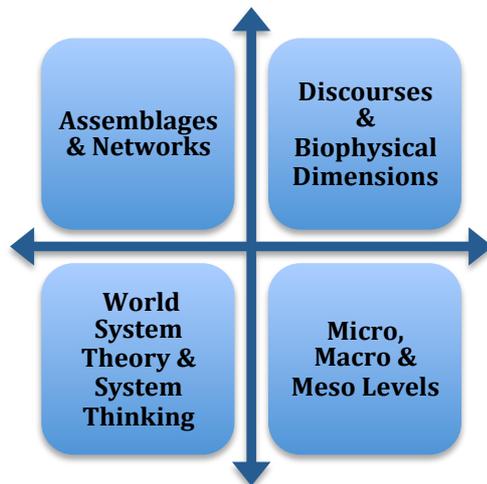
Source: Own illustration based on Svarstad’s concept (2005)

²³ A more explicit delineation will follow in chapter 6.



The previous sections have delineated the ways in which the political ecology approach applied in this thesis will draw on assemblage and network theory, system theory as well as world-systems analysis. These are then embedded in a discursive approach as delineated in the next section. In this thesis the theories are hence not mutually exclusive, but conjointly interacting. The dimensions in which the analysis is undertaken, is visualized in the multi-scale analysis figure two below.

Figure 2: Multi-Scale Analysis



Source: Own illustration

4.2 Discursive Approach

Discourse analysis is a central method of analysis in my research. It is so, because in order to better understand the perceptions of the Smart CSOs Initiative’s participants, it is vital to scrutinize their ideas of reality and “the status quo as something that is upheld by key actors through discourse”, as Hajer points out (1995: 55). In specific, I will examine key themes and discourses expressed and communicated at the conference in London, the interviews conducted, supplemented by the discussions in the Smart CSOs Initiative’s Ning-forum online, and the findings from the document analysis. There is a vast amount of research



applying and discussing environmental discourse analysis. The studies on environmental discourses by John Dryzek (2005) and Maarten Hajer (1995) are however central to this thesis, as their theoretical and analytical frameworks are well suited for the analysis of the Smart CSOs Initiative for different reasons. Firstly, both offer a historical contextualization of the discourses in time as well as in space, which is central to this political ecology approach. Secondly, both authors analyze environmental discourses predominantly taking place in the Western part of the world, in which the Smart CSOs Initiative is located. Nevertheless, there is a significant difference between the two studies, regarding the way in which they analyze discourses. Whereas Dryzek discusses and historically contextualizes several discourses currently at play, Hajer focuses on one of these – ecological modernization – which he analyzes and applies to his two case studies of acid rain in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. In this research I will combine different elements of the theoretical and analytical thinking of both. In particular, I will draw on Hajer’s argumentative approach to analyze discourses, in which he perceives “politics as a struggle for discursive hegemony in which actors try to secure support for their definition of reality” (1995: 59). Even though it might not be apparent at a first glance, in which ways the Smart CSOs Initiative’s participants are part of such political struggles, I argue that they are actively engaged and deeply entrenched in the political arena. For instance, in the Smart CSOs Conference background paper they clearly state their goal “to rethink and redesign the ways they work and how they try to influence the political, social and human systems towards sustainability” (Narberhaus 2011: 10). For this reason, I find Hajer’s argumentative approach very suitable to examine the way discourses are produced and reproduced within the initiative. In this approach, Hajer defines a discourse²⁴ as “a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that is produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities” (1995: 60). In order to analyze this ensemble formed and negotiated by arguments, Hajer’s argumentative approach encompasses, next to the concept of storylines,

²⁴ A more elaborated discussion of how discourses are understood within this thesis can be found in chapter 3.2.4.



another middle-range concept, which Hajer calls discourse-coalitions. Both concepts are more explicitly delineated in the following.

Hajer defines storylines as “narratives on social reality through which elements from many different domains are combined and that provide actors with a set of symbolic references that suggest a common understanding” (1995: 62). He understands storylines as “political devices” (1995: 62) as well as “discursive practice” (1995: 63). Furthermore, Hajer argues that they are the “essential discursive cement that creates communicative networks among actors with different or at best overlapping perceptions and understandings. Thus, they are, therefore, also the prime vehicles of change” (1995: 63). Another aspect vital to mention with regard to storylines is what Hajer names “discursive affinities” (1995: 66). With this term Hajer refers to his argument that the storylines’ “discursive power” is not based in strategic decisions of individuals, or because certain elements just match “in a logical way”, but as “separate elements might have a similar cognitive or discursive structure which suggests that they belong together. In that case actors may not understand the detail of the argument but will typically argue that ‘it sounds right’” (1995: 67). With regard to the understanding of narratives it is significant to mention that Hajer defines storylines as a “generative sort of narrative that allows actors to draw upon various discursive categories to give meaning to specific physical or social phenomena” (1995: 56). Thus, in this research storylines are understood as a specific type of narrative, which are wider applicable in scope and key components of discourses.

Using the concept of storylines is fruitful for the discourse analysis of my thesis, as it correlates with the Smart CSOs Initiative in different ways. Firstly, different storylines are exactly these, I reason, which are at play when the participants communicate with each other in the spheres of different discourses. Secondly, they display the interconnectedness of discourse and change, with which this thesis is concerned. Finally, Hajer’s understanding of narratives as storylines is very essential as it makes the storylines not only an analytical research tool but also a part of the instrument or concept of the participants and the Smart



CSOs Initiative itself – for instance when they talk about their understandings of narratives. These different perspectives I will address in the context of the analysis these phenomena in chapter six.

The second middle-range concept of the argumentative approach, besides storylines, are discourse-coalitions, which Hajer defines within three dimensions. They are an “ensemble of (1) a set of story-lines; (2) the actors who utter these storylines; and (3) the practices in which this discursive activity is based” (1995: 65). These three dimensions, as well as the concept of storylines, I will apply as analytical concepts within the analysis.

Dryzek’s contextualization of environmental discourses is supplementing Hajer’s approach, from which I utilize certain key ideas and concepts. These are, especially his argumentation on ecological modernization, but also his general categorization of environmental discourses. In the latter, Dryzek identifies two pairs of each other opposing discourse classifications, depending on the stance that the discourse takes towards industrialism²⁵. These should not be understood as absolute categories, but as including nuances that the different discourses can demonstrate. The first pair of classification describes discourses as taking reformist or radical stances towards the dominant political-economic order. Dryzek’s second pair classifies a discourse as either being prosaic or imaginative. Prosaic discourses perceive the roots of environmental problems in the established industrial political economy, which is mostly seen as given. Within these discourses change can include either quite radical or reformist actions. Imaginative discourses, in contrast, view environmental problems more as opportunities and treat them not in opposition to economic problems, but as a holistic entity (2005: 14). They view the environment as the “heart of society and its cultural, moral, and economic systems, rather than being seen as a source of difficulties standing the systems” (2005: 14). Change as

²⁵ Dryzek views environmental discourses to have evolved with industrial society, which is why he positions the classification of environmental discourses (reformist vs. radical and prosaic vs. imaginative) around industrialism (Dryzek 2005: 14).



well, can happen in reformist or radical ways in this discourse. With these classification tools, Dryzek differentiates between four main discourses: “environmental problem solving” as prosaic and reformist, “the quest for sustainability” as reformist and imaginative, “survivalism²⁶” as radical and prosaic and “green radicalism” as imaginative and radical (2005: 15). The environmental problem solving discourse²⁷, he argues, recognizes ecological problems, but tries to solve these within the current frame of political economy of industrial society (2005: 73). Dryzek understands green radicalism as rejecting the “basic structure of industrial society and the way the environment is conceptualized therein in favor of a variety of quite different alternative interpretations of humans, their society, and their place in the world” (2005: 16). Dryzek subdivides the discourse of sustainability into sustainable development and ecological modernization and green radicalism in change through green consciousness and change through green politics (2005: 181). Displaying these different categories is essential for understanding how ecological modernization is located within larger discourses. In addition, when applying Hajer’s discourse analysis and ecological modernization approach to the Smart CSOs Initiative, the analysis might include aspects, which cannot be sufficiently understood within the ecological modernization discourse, but possible within other discourses such as green radicalism.

²⁶ Dryzek views the main underlying idea of survivalism in the argument that „continued economic and population growth will eventually hit limits set by the Earth’s stock of natural resources and the capacity of its ecosystems to support human agricultural and industrial activity” (2005: 15). The Club of Rome with its *Limits to Growth Debate* was thus one among the first ones to widely display it publically (Dryzek 2005: 15).

²⁷ The three main ways to implement these are via bureaucracy – i.e. via administrative rationalism, democracy – i.e. via democratic pragmatism, and markets – i.e. via economic rationalism. Even though traces of this thinking, as I would argue, can be found among all spheres of society, Dryzek characterizes the main actors of these discourses as respectively experts and managers (2005: 89), everyone (2005: 114) and the self-interested homo economicus (2005: 137).



4.3 Methods of Data Collection

The selection of methods was undertaken according to different criteria. Firstly, the methods had to be appropriate and suitable to the research phenomena regarding time and space. Secondly, they had to adhere to ethical and confidential criteria. Lastly, they had to appropriate the significance of scales inherent in human ecology and political ecology approaches. Regarding the time dimension, I want to emphasize that this thesis encompasses the period of time between the beginnings of the Smart CSOs Initiative and its early stages until April 2011 and thus does not include developments thereafter. I choose the method of observant participation at various phases during my research, because it allowed me to better understand the biophysical reality of human environmental relations. I selected semi-structured interviews as a method to better comprehend the understandings of the individuals participating in the project and the respective discourses, in which they were embedded. Furthermore, the main research method of this study was document analysis. This included the analysis of scientific sources, primary and secondary documents utilized and produced within the initiative, e-mail correspondence within the initiative as well as the Ning presentation of involved actors and organizations, which allows for a historical and discursive contextualization of the research phenomena. In the following the implementation of methods supplementary to the document analysis are described in more detail:

- **Observant participation²⁸**: The observant participation took place between August 2010 and April 2011. It included the working environment of the CSCP in Wuppertal and the WWF-UK in London, the employees and partners involved in the initiative,

²⁸ In this research observant participation is understood as constantly participating (not only observing) in the phenomena studied. It is very similar to participant observation, which Laurier defines as “spending time being, living and working with people or communities in order to understand them” (2003: 133). Yet, whereas participant observation focuses more on the observation as such and does not necessarily include constant participation, observant participation stresses the participatory aspect.



their communication and lastly the Smart CSOs Conference in London in March with the respective participants.

- **Observant participation at the Smart CSOs Conference in London in March 2011:** Overall about 94 people from 17 different countries participated in the conference, nine of which belonged to the organizing team including myself. During the participation in the conference I was, next to the role as researcher, a facilitator of the various introduction and discussion groups, which made up the structure of the conference. Partaking in the conference in at least three different ways as partly a researcher, as part of the organizing team, and as participant myself, provided me with data on different views and perspectives. At the same time this demanded a high degree of awareness of these different roles, their challenges, and opportunities, to which I adhered throughout the research.

- **Interviews²⁹:**

I conducted 23 semi-structured telephone interviews via Internet with conference participants, who had been contacted via e-mail. The interviews were held prior to the conference, as I was interested in the personal opinions and knowledge of the participants about the research questions and thus reduced a possible strong influence of the conference's contents and ideas. For the selection process of the interviewees I utilized the purposive sampling method by focusing on different quality criteria to aim for a preferably diverse sample. This involved a geographical diversity, meaning that I contacted participants from 16 out of 17 countries participating in the conference up to that point. I was able to interview 23 people out of 38 contacted from eleven different

²⁹ For the purpose of the confidentiality of this research, the interviewees' names and backgrounds remain anonymous. However, to demonstrate scientific credibility and transparency a name-substitution system for the interviews was utilized. In this, the interviews were randomly allocated a number, which are utilized as references in this study. This also allows the reader to distinguish between different opinions and perceptions displayed.



countries, out of a total amount of 94 people participating in the conference. Among these were ten women and 13 men. Another criterion was the interviewees' field of expertise. Participants working for CSOs were the majority among the conference participants, but I also interviewed members of academia and governments. Thus, I was able to interview 17 people from CSOs, four academics, and two government representatives. Out of these, 9 interviews were analyzed in-depth, whereas the others served as supportive data. This selection took place according to the qualitative relevancy the interviews demonstrated to answer the research question posed and according to the finite scale of this thesis.

4.4 Methodological Reflection

Methods always embody a researcher's own perceptions, which in turn shape the research results and vice versa. However, there are certain criteria that add to the trustworthiness of scientific work, which I have applied in this research. One of these is triangulation, understood as applying more than one method to the research phenomena studied (Bryman 2004: 379). Thus, I was able to supplement my findings from the document analysis with the results from the observant participation as well as the interviews and vice versa. In addition, throughout the research I acted within quality criteria, such as transparency, coherence and sensitivity to context (Bryman 2004: 380).

Critical points that might have added limitations to the data are such as the ubiquitous amount of information that was available or relevant to the research. Even though I produced a thorough document review of various relevant texts, it has to be stressed that I had to limit the amount of data to the most relevant due to the wide-ranging contents of the phenomena as well as the given time and scope of this thesis. However, by being aware of this circumstance, I was able to reflect upon it throughout the thesis.



By selecting the method of observant participation, the participatory aspect of my research within the Smart CSOs Initiative was emphasized, as opposed to a solely observation of the research phenomena. This demonstrates certain advantages with regard to the deepened insights about the understanding of the participants' arguments and perceptions I received. It also allowed me to, at least partially, experience the Smart CSOs Conference from the perspective of the participants. Disadvantages of this type of method and also the semi-structured interviews can be seen in the immediate interchange of knowledge between my role as a researcher as well as facilitator and the conference participants. Being at the same time a vital source of data, it can also potentially blur the boundaries between scientific findings and the perceptions of the participants. This constant interaction of knowledge is however, I would argue, a central characteristic of human perceived reality.

5. The Smart CSOs Initiative

The Smart CSOs Initiative was initiated by the WWF-UK and supported by the CSCP. The overall objective of the initiative is to use “the collective knowledge of leading thinkers from academia and civil society to develop and define an agenda that will help CSOs to create new strategies that will be more effective in tackling the environmental crisis and working towards a sustainable economy and society” (Smart CSOs 2010). Originally aimed at creating a roadmap³⁰ for more effective CSO strategies towards the Great Transition (Smart CSOs 2010), the initiative describes itself as a community of practice currently exploring such new strategies (Smart CSOs 2011a). The community of practice consists of “leaders from civil society organisations, academics, and funders exploring how CSOs can become stronger change agents towards the Great Transition to a sustainable society and economy” (Smart CSOs 2011b).

³⁰ In this research, the roadmap is understood as the development of outline of the different, strategic steps or actions that are meant to be undertaken to advance the initiative's objective.



5.1 Background, Key Contents and Fields of Action

The Smart CSOs Initiative was initiated within the EU-funded Action Town Project³¹ and developed since then as an independent project led by WWF-UK and supported by the CSCP as well as a range of individuals from different organizations (Smart CSOs 2011b). Action Town is a project realized by a consortium of partners all over Europe and has focused on the question of “how CSOs can provide new insights for research in sustainable consumption and production with the goal of reaching absolute decoupling of economic growth from resource use” (Action Town n.d). The leading partner of the Action Town project is the CSCP³². The Action Town project has been launched in 2008 and has identified key areas (via a survey among 20 CSOs and workshops) in Europe in which better collaboration of academia and CSOs is needed. These findings resulted in extra funding under FP7³³, which marks the essential starting point of the Smart CSOs Initiative. The CSCP/WWF identified themes and tendencies in which CSOs strategies do not seem to address the current environmental and social challenges very well, for instance by focusing on single issues and technical fixes, a lack in understanding systems and how to affect change in systems, and advocacy work often focusing on symptoms rather than on root causes (2010a). In addition, findings from social psychology and behavioral science indicate the role of values being enabled by communication (Kasser 2010), which in turn activates certain frames³⁴ and thereby influences

³¹ The Action Town Project is a project funded by the European Commission within the FP7-framework program, which encompasses two year funded projects (http://cordis.europa.eu/fp7/home_en.html).

³² The other partners are the non-for-profit organizations ANPED (The Northern Alliance for Sustainability) based in Brussels, ECODES (Ecologica y Desarrollo) in Spain, Green Liberty in Latvia, MAMA-86 in the Ukraine, TTGV (Technology Development Foundation of Turkey). They include the WWF-UK as well as the research institutions SEI (Stockholm Environment Institute) and SERI (Sustainable Europe Research Institute) (<http://action-town.eu/town-hall/>).

³³ FP7 is „the short name for the Seventh Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development. This is the EU's main instrument for funding research in Europe and it will run from 2007-2013“ (FP7 n.d.) (http://ec.europa.eu/research/fp7/index_en.cfm?pg=understanding).

³⁴ According to Lakoff, frames are the mental structures that allow human beings to understand reality. Values are embedded in these mental structures. “Frames include semantic roles, relations between roles, and relations to other frames”. A hospital frame, for example, includes objects and actors Doctor, Nurse, Patient, Visitor, Receptionist, Operating Room, Recovery Room, Scalpel, etc. but, also their relations, e.g., Doctors operate on Patients in Operating Rooms with Scalpels“ (Lakoff 2010:71).



the way in which audiences perceive messages (Crompton 2010; Lakoff 2010). The Smart CSOs Initiative includes various working streams and spheres in which it operates. Its work started with an initial conference of about 20 experts from academia and civil society in March 2010 in Wuppertal, Germany. There, the participants began to discuss how to develop more systemic perspectives to approach the work of CSOs.

In the beginning of October 2010 the roadmap process continued with the launch of a digital non-public online-community-forum, utilizing the social network platform Ning. This communication platform consists of about 90 civil society leaders, experts and funders, each of them being engaged with environmental issues in different ways. The platform is subdivided into five thematic groups discussing key areas identified to create effective strategies for CSOs. These discussion groups or opportunity areas are (Ning 2010):

- **Embedding system thinking in CSO practice:** The central aim of system thinking for the CSOs is to perceive their organization and work as part of a “whole and the interconnections within the whole” and thus helping them to “better understand feedback loops and resistance to change the systems and to thereby be savvier around the actions they take to influence change” (Smart CSOs 2010).
- **A new narrative – how CSOs can work with our cultural values:** In order to achieve the Great Transition, the Smart CSOs Project stresses the importance of a narrative, which delineates who the participating CSOs are and what they need to be. This working group focuses on the significance of values, which are supportive or conflicting with pro-environmental behavior in their communication and advocacy strategies (Smart CSOs 2010).
- **Developing new models – how CSOs support the seeds of the new economy:** Enhancing new models of societies and economies requires the CSOs to support innovation activities of grassroots organizations etc., to interlink change agents, and to “strengthen national and international policy advocacy processes” (Smart CSOs 2010).



- **A new global movement – from fragmentation to cross-sectoral collaboration:** The Great Transition is perceived as a collaborative effort of all spheres of society by the Smart CSOs Initiative. The current point of development in this group focuses on the establishment of a platform for all non-profit organizations and supports the idea that a “shift in societal values can potentially serve to unite organisations that currently do not see any common ground leading to a global movement around the Great Transition” (Smart CSOs 2010).
- **Engaging funders in CSOs strategies towards the Great Transition:** Funding is seen as a highly significant aspect for the context in which CSOs operate. With regard to system thinking, the CSOs want to achieve more effective “monitoring and evaluation methodologies” towards more long-term perspectives and they also aim for collaboration in between different CSOs to develop their own strengths and avoid to compete for funding (Smart CSOs 2010).

The platform includes diverse tools such as comment functions, member sections, libraries for videos, and literature. As a social network each member can present him or herself with a picture and has to answer the following three questions: “Why are you interested in this dialogue on CSOs’ role in the Great Transition? What do you think is the most important thing CSOs can do to catalyse the Great Transition? And – How can this online community of practice be of most value to you?” (Ning 2010).

These key content areas served as basis for the discussion groups during the Smart CSOs Conference taking place on the 14th and 15th of March 2011 in London. The conference was meant to be a place for discussion and learning, i.e. a community of practice, to talk about the next steps for a possible project continuation. The conference resulted in the commitment of a



core group of organizations to continue the Smart CSOs Initiative in a longer-term perspective, which is in the process of being formalized³⁵ (Smart CSOs 2011c: 2).

Key questions, which the organizers of the conference wanted to have explored, were (WWF/CSCP 2010a):

- “What insights can help CSOs to understand much better how a socio-technical transition to a sustainable economy can happen?”
- What role do societal values play in social change towards a sustainable society and what can CSOs learn from cognitive science?
- How can CSOs use bottom-up approaches to experiment and practice with the new economic models and un-lock policy processes?
- What capacity building, knowledge transfer programmes, and new research is needed to support CSOs in developing more effective strategies?
- How can we engage funders in CSO strategies towards systemic change and in new collaborative research that can strengthen the role CSOs play in the Great Transition?”

The above display the various approaches and scales from which the Smart CSOs Initiative aims to operate and the analysis in chapter six will draw on this more elaborately.

5.2 Interviewing Participants of the Smart CSOs Initiative

This section delineates emerging themes of the interviews and contextualizes them in the context of the initiative. The interviews were organized into key areas such as the participants’ understanding of change, CSOs and the Great Transition, CSOs challenges, opportunities, ideas and strategies, as well as the collaboration between different actors of

³⁵ Thus, the processual character of the initiative has to be stressed and that the initiative’s development was found to be in its beginning stages, when this thesis was written.



society and system thinking. During the interviews I focused on both the diverging perspectives the interview participants demonstrated and the more subtle lines of thoughts behind these, as this then resulted in more reflective answers on how change was imagined. Most interviewees tried to offer multiple perspectives of their understandings, for instance about how change is possible and where they saw leverage points for change or corporation. This was, in particular, often connected to their career or interests. Another insight was that several interviewees perceived the Smart CSOs Initiative as a somewhat unique conference (Interviews 1, 6), taking place at a time in history, which is characterized by different crises (such as environmental, economical and financial). Several interviewees viewed this as a window of opportunity (Interviews 6,7,9), but several also stressed the challenges that current socio-economic systems are facing (Interviews 1,8). Some interviewees noticed unique features in the conference, such as applied systemic, holistic thinking on a scale and among a community of practice, which might be able to create change on macro and meso scales (Interviews 9,2,1). Yet, most took a rather open perspective as they had just recently become involved in the Smart CSOs Initiative (Interviews 6, 10, 17, 21). Some remained rather critical towards what they should expect from the conference (Interviews 4,8). A more in depth delineation of the key emerging themes of the interviews, in particular the overall research follows in the analysis.

5.3 The Smart CSOs Conference in London

About 94 participants, including the conference organizing team participated in the Smart CSOs conference in London on March 14th and 15th 2011. The conference was organized by a facilitation team, which initiated different forms of group discussions, speeches, and forums. After a general introduction to the Smart CSOs Initiative and the delineation of the overall structure of the conference, two introductory presentations were held, one focusing on an overall perspective of challenging the system and one on the role of cultural values underlying communications and strategies. Thereupon, about 12 smaller groups were formed consisting of about five to ten participants each. These groups comprised different participants each time



they met. Whereas in the beginning introductory questions and expectations were discussed, the groups proceeded into discussing key contents of the conference background paper, namely: system thinking, a new narrative, developing new models, a new global movement, and engaging funders. A facilitator, who facilitated the overall introduction and communication process between the participants, accommodated each group. Different expectations and thoughts about the conference and its background paper were discussed while the participants simultaneously drew their thoughts and expectations, images, or whatever helped them to visualize their thinking on a paper being provided on the discussion tables. Thereafter, this was shared with all participants in regular proceeding forums consisting of all conference participants. The different types of discussion groups, such as the island style debate³⁶ or in depth discussion groups, were adjusted depending on the conference's development, assessed by the conference organizers. This involved how the conference's proceeding was perceived at aiming for more concrete results towards the initiative's continuation beyond the conference and also based upon the feedback of the participants whether they needed more structured or flexible forms of discussion. The outcome of the conference was the commitment of a core group of people to continue the Smart CSOs Initiative, aiming to further develop the community of practice of those who are committed to "become stronger change agents for the Great Transition" (Smart CSOs 2011c: 2).

6. Analysis

The following multi-scale analysis as introduced in section 4.1 is based within an altered framework of Svarstad's four level analysis. The first level of analysis represents a historical contextualization of environmental discourses on the global level, within which civil society

³⁶ At the Smart CSOs Conference 'islands' were organized in form of groups of chairs, with about 10 participants, a content host and one facilitator each, who had the task to briefly introduce the main contents of the discussion and listen to the expectations of the participants. Per group this lasted for about 10 minutes each until the groups rotated to the next tables or 'islands'.



organizations have been involved in the discussion on enhancing sustainable societies and economies. The second level refers to the discourse production among the actors belonging to the network of the Smart CSOs Initiative, especially at the Smart CSOs Conference. The third level will examine some instances of the biophysical reality in form of the Smart CSOs Conference in combination with key topic areas emerged throughout the research. On the last level I will contextualize the Smart CSOs Initiative within the discourses delineated on the levels before. But more so, I will interconnect the different levels by contextualizing the Smart CSOs Initiative when moving back from the local to the global perspective.

6.1 The Smart CSOs Initiative and Environmental Discourses

As mentioned in the theoretical and analytical background, several scholars have argued for and described different environmental discourses. Dryzek's typology of survivalism, environmental problem solving, sustainability, and green radicalism are however the most relevant to historically contextualize the object of study of this thesis, as these depict some of the major discourses within the spatiotemporal frame of analysis of the research phenomena, beginning around the 1980s and continuing to the present. A socio-historical background discussion of these discourses in time as well as in space can be found in chapter 3.1 and 4.2. This section however looks specifically at the ways in which CSOs have engaged in shaping the debate around sustainability and sustainable alternatives along the line of different environmental discourses.

Within the Smart CSOs Initiative sustainability was a commonly utilized term, not specifically defined, but with a broad ranging scope. For instance, the background paper of the conference mentions the term sustainability 16 times, but within different contexts. In half of these usages sustainability is applied to describe the so perceived current situation as a "sustainability crisis" (Narberhaus 2011: 4,6,22). When looking at sustainability as a goal to be achieved, the background paper makes a reference to the four pillars of the "Earth Charter" linking these pillars to the aim of the Great Transition. The first principle is "Respect and



Care for the Community of Life“, the second “Ecological Integrity“, the third “Social and Economic Justice“, and the fourth “Democracy, Nonviolence, and Peace“ (Narberhaus 2011: 13). As part of the “Ecological Integrity” pillar, the understanding and advancing of “ecological sustainability” is emphasized (The Earth Charter Initiative n.d.). Even though this clearly stresses the ecological dimension of sustainability, I would argue that the terms care, community, democracy, peace and justice also refer to social and cultural dimensions of sustainability. In addition, this suggests a holistic understanding of sustainability within the Smart CSOs Initiative, or as mentioned by an interviewee: ‘Sustainability requires an expansive consciousness’. These perspectives on sustainability, I would argue, imply an intrinsic value to the Earth itself. This in turn cannot be found in Brundtland’s sustainable development definition, as Dryzek emphasizes (2005: 146).

In the discourse of survivalism, among which Dryzek (2005:30) numbers Meadows and the Club of Rome, “a sustainable society is one that has in place informational, social, and institutional mechanisms to keep in check the positive feedback loops that cause exponential population and capital growth” (Meadows et. al 1992: 209). Resulting from this argument within the survivalist discourse, Dryzek then delineates that according to Meadows sustainability means “an end to economic growth” (2005: 147). The Smart CSOs Initiative’s participants do not mention such an end to economic growth per se, but they clearly suggest a systemic change of economic structures and they emphasize that an “economy beyond material growth and beyond consumerism is desirable, achievable, and necessary” (Narberhaus 2011: 12). Thus, the Smart CSOs Initiative’s members demonstrate understandings, which can partly be related to the discourse of survivalism.

The environmental problem solving discourse – i.e. administrative rationalism, democratic pragmatism, and economic rationalism – might not seem to appear relevant, when analyzing the Smart CSOs Initiative, if one reviews the emphasis on systemic change as mentioned in the background paper (Narberhaus 2011: 12). In addition, several interviewees also mentioned that solutions to environmental problems should not solely stem from within the



system itself. However, at the same time the initiative's organizations involved in pragmatic thinking related to the environmental problem solving discourse, such as the discussion of how to engage funders (Narberhaus 2011: 38) or how to become more effective in their strategies towards the Great Transition. This is mostly due to the circumstance that the Smart CSOs participants, being part of the current system themselves, are bound to its rules. In the understanding of Geel's multi-level perspective (MLP)³⁷, this would mean that they act within the socio-technological regimes of the meso-level, i.e. policy regulations, laws, and technical standards, but also the macro-levels of the landscape, i.e. cultural values or the material environments. Thus, when the Smart CSOs Initiative and its participants adhere to the rules set by those acting within these regimes as dominant actors, the environmental problem solving discourse becomes one dominant way of treating environmental issues for the organizations of the Smart CSOs Initiative.

As mentioned in the theoretical framework, Hajer refers to ecological modernization in its origins as “the discourse that recognizes the structural character of the environmental problematique but none the less assumes that existing political, economic, and social institutions can internalize the care for the environment” (1995: 25). This rather weak understanding of ecological modernization is quite compatible with administrative rationalism as Dryzek argued (2005: 231). The Smart CSOs Initiative clearly recognizes the environmental problematique, but does demonstrate a ‘beyond the system’ perspective when talking about the Great Transition. Hajer's thinking on reflexive ecological modernization however adds a different perspective when analyzing the Smart CSOs Initiative through this lens. As Hajer further delineates from the viewpoint of reflexive ecological modernization the challenge becomes to “think of an organization of ecological modernization as a process that allows for social change to take place democratically and in a way that stimulates the creation of an – at least partially – shared vision of the future” (1995: 280). The terms Hajer utilizes in

³⁷ A theoretical discussion and conceptual delineation of Geel's MLP is found in chapter 3.3.



both quotes above – i.e. structural character, environmental problematique, process, social change, democracy, shared vision, future, etc., – demonstrate a distinct similarity with the language and thinking of the Smart CSOs Initiative. The idea of reflexive ecological modernization Hajer pursues is thus very similar to the thinking within the Smart CSOs Initiative. These similarities between what one could call the discourse of reflexive ecological modernization and the Smart CSOs Initiative in systemic, but also in visionary dimensions, suggest a tendency of the initiative as having much of its thinking based in the discourse of reflexive ecological modernization.

As delineated above, the ways in which the environmental problematique and its solutions are defined within the Smart CSOs Initiative are very similar to Hajer’s discourse of reflexive ecological modernization, which in turn resembles well with Dryzek’s understanding of the green radicalism discourse. However, I want to highlight that some of the assumptions and metaphors of green radicalism discourse move beyond reflexive ecological modernization. In this sense, Hajer seems to perceive the starting point of reflexive ecological modernization very much in “new institutional arrangements” in which public discourse can take place (1995: 281), whereas green radicalism wants to achieve change through “the way people think” (Dryzek 2005: 183) and via “political change” (Dryzek 2005: 203). The green radicalism discourse, in Dryzek’s terms, rejects the “basic structure of industrial society and the way the environment is conceptualized therein in favor of a variety of quite different alternative interpretations of humans, their society, and their place in the world” (2005: 16). This emphasis on alternative interpretations parallels with what Hajer understands of shared future visions and also with the alternatives imagined within the Smart CSOs Initiative. In this sense the discourses share the storyline of a better future that somehow must be alternative to the current one, which also can be seen as a dominant storyline in many global discourses.



6.1.1 Conclusions

In essence, the Smart CSOs Initiative thinking was closely tied to two key objectives. One being the desire to change the current system or components of it and the second was to enable what “matters to us as human beings”, which was a common mentioned statement within the initiative. This storyline of change and the perception of human beings within the Smart CSOs Initiative are thus rather coherent with the discourse of green radical change than with reflexive ecological modernization. Nevertheless, the Smart CSOs Initiative cannot solely be considered as belonging to one specific discourse. Overall, the Smart CSOs Initiative can rather be characterized as an assembly of ideas embedded in different global environmental discourses. This is partly due to what Dryzek calls “complementarities across discourses” (2005: 231) and the earlier mentioned nuances these discourses can demonstrate between radical and reformist as well as between prosaic and imaginative. For instance, “a weak form of ecological modernization is quite compatible with administrative rationalism’s strong state and some of the instruments advocated in economic rationalism (such as green taxes)” (Dryzek 2005: 231). At the same time, core disagreements between the discourses are also existent, for instance, as Dryzek mentions, economic rationalists will most likely never agree with “administrative rationalists, democratic pragmatists, or green radicals about the best way of ordering environmental affairs” (2005: 231). In addition, these discourses are applied differently in different contexts, depending on the angle and problem they are used to analyze, which was noticeable within the Smart CSOs Initiative. The initiative can be considered as taking place at a time and space, in which the question, whether sustainable development within the dominant neoliberal capitalist system is possible or even a solution is increasingly posed, while at the same time the most common modes of action and thinking are still based within this very same system. Thus within the discourse of (reflexive) ecological modernization and the initial European scope of the initiative, attempts of changing these dominant *modi operandi* within their own organizations can be traced, but more in their early stages.



6.2 The Production of Discourses within the Smart CSOs Initiative

This section firstly presents an examination of the ways in which environmental problems are defined and framed among the network of actors linked to the Smart CSOs Initiative, in particular at the Smart CSOs Conference, according to storylines, actors, and practices, which might constitute discourse coalitions. Secondly, this will then be linked to an examination about the ways in which the solutions to these problems are shaped. My findings suggest several storylines underlying the understandings and the discussions of the participants within the Smart CSOs Initiative.

One of these was the storyline that the Earth's ecosystems and thus human kind are facing an environmental crisis connected to other crises, such the financial or economic crisis. This storyline was apparent when some participants were stressing the urgency of the situation and the need for action. An explanation for the continuation of the environmental crisis was also often related to the failure of the environmental movement itself, as for instance, the thinking of the Smart CSOs Initiative was in many ways influenced by Shellenberger and Nordhaus' "The Death of Environmentalism" (2004). This article has criticized the environmental movement for addressing and defining the environmental crisis in ways that led to false solutions, for example by focusing too much on technical fixes to the current crisis than on its underlying systemic causes. This had also been a finding from the previous workshops and surveys of the Action Town Project (2009: 26), which in turn had influenced the contentual course the initiative undertook.

Furthermore, the Great Transition itself can be seen as a storyline focusing on the transition towards more sustainable societies and economies. As delineated earlier, the Great Transition is understood as the objective and process to "advance a global civilization of sustainability, equity, and well-being through research, education, and action" (Tellus Institute 2009). This storyline contains several key premises. Firstly, as outlined in the conference background paper of the Smart CSOs Conference, "systemic change is required" by changing "cultural



values, life styles, and economic structures”. Secondly, this change in cultural values views a shift from materialistic towards intrinsic values as key to advance the Great Transition. Furthermore, these premises include an “economy beyond material growth”, “beyond GDP” and “beyond consumerism”, which are all seen as possible and necessary (Narberhaus 2011: 12-13).

In addition, I examined dominating storylines of the working environment of meetings like the Smart CSOs Conference, i.e. the ways in which the members of the CSOs interacted and networked with each other or also how they thought in terms of the community of practice. One storyline shared by most participants can be summarized as: *‘We as environmental organizations are capable of enabling change and already engaging in it’*³⁸. This storyline was communicated on a rather abstract level, underlying key statements of the participants. Even though it was not often explicitly practical or comprehensively apparent, the very existence of the initiative and the personal agendas engaging in it, demonstrated this storyline. Another storyline I observed can be read in terms of *‘We as organizations in a competitive environment of CSOs’*. This storyline was constituted by the ways in which the different participants communicated with each other. It involved for instance how they promoted their organizations or talked about matters that did not involve the Smart CSOs Initiative per se, but focused more on bi- or multilateral project collaborations between the organizations. One example of this tension between collaboration and competition was the way in which an organization should respond to another organization’s online comment on the former’s own campaign via social media. The question arose whether the respective organization should talk about its own campaign in its own social media channels, or whether they should respond to their ‘competitor’s comment’ on their campaign in their ‘competitor’s web stream’. *‘We as learning organizations embedded in networks’* was another storyline, supported by statements about the importance of viral learning and models of change, self-organization, system, as

³⁸ Italics and apostrophes are used to illustrate the storylines I have observed during the research.



well as anti-linear thinking for achieving change. Furthermore, *‘My organization and its specific agenda’* was another noted storyline, which was supplemented by one participant’s point about how the conference’s contents were really interesting, but that it always had to be seen from the perspective of the interest of the participant’s organization, which mandate the participant had to fulfill.

Moreover, the term community of practice includes key narratives of the organizations and their networks themselves, which I elaborate in the following. In one narrative the community of practice was seen as *‘an environment to learn for me and my organization’*. For instance, during the discussion groups one could notice that the participants were often talking about an issue from a perspective which seemed to be of great value to them as some issues showed reoccurring patterns in their statements, even though the content was not always directly connected to the discussion at stake. This also partly relates to what Hajer would coin as discourse affinity. This perspective of a learning environment was continuously emphasized by several participants – in particular by the facilitation team of the conference – such as *‘We need to pick up the people, where they are’*. This was a kind of underlying principle in the initiative, but also beyond (Interviews 4,9). Furthermore, the community of practice was perceived by some as *‘an environment to exchange knowledge and discuss, in essence a creative space’*. For instance, several participants appreciated the time and space they were given to think and talk about issues like system thinking, a new narrative, or the Great Transition. The community of practice was also for many an *‘environment to network and exchange contacts’*. For instance, during the breaks at the conference one could often notice that groups or pairs of people formed. They seemed to be deeply engaged in conversations either about the conference, key interests that connected them or they solely met to exchange contacts. Beyond these personal or organizational benefits, a second larger narrative of the *‘community of practice as a way to move forward the objective of advancing the Great Transition’* was communicated. From this perspective the conference meant a significant momentum to initiate collaboration, as well as to build capacity and networks in order to advance the aim of the Great Transition. Participants, who seemed to be more familiar with



the background paper, the initiative, and system thinking, especially emphasized this point of view.

6.2.1 Conclusions

The actors who communicated these storylines and narratives were all participants of the Smart CSOs Conference, influenced by the agendas and mandates of their respective organizations. However, those participants who were more actively engaged in the discussions often seemed to be already dealing with issues like system thinking, socio-economic change, or global movements in their daily work. It is significant to mention that especially through bi- and multilateral meetings, telephone conferences, and e-mail exchange the facilitation and conference organization team had become an influential group of actors in shaping the content of the conference and thus also the storylines and practices. In many cases this led to a certain dominance of their storylines and thus their objectives and channeled the understanding of the participants about the aim of the Smart CSOs Initiative. Contradictions and differences among the individual understandings of the Smart CSOs Initiative's participants were thus sometimes suppressed. Yet, these different understandings about sustainable alternatives or the objectives of the Smart CSOs Initiative were also embedded in the different storylines and thus shaped the direction the initiative took. Even though these understandings were not always compatible with each other, they were still able to form a common understanding to a certain extent. In this sense, for the purpose of the conference the participants seemed, for instance, willing to engage in the dominating storyline of the Great Transition as outlined by the initiators of the Smart CSOs Initiative. This storyline was however not clearly defined or negotiated in an open communication process. The storyline of the Great Transition was more based upon assumptions of the participants of what the Great Transition might mean to the other participants, which resulted in already leading perceptions and understandings to dominate the direction of the Initiative.

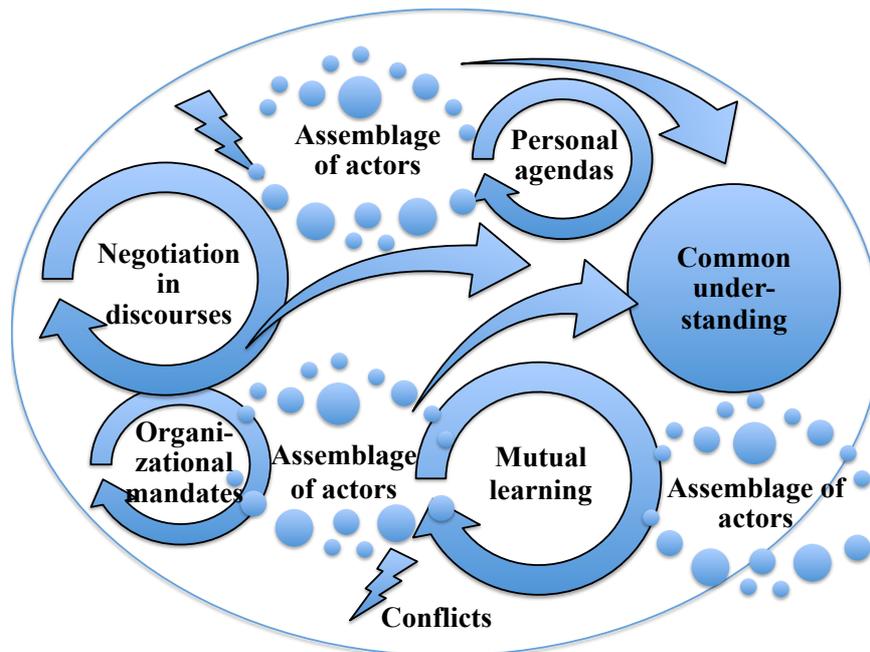


6.3 Biophysical Realities and Emerging Themes within the Initiative

The Smart CSOs Conference can be perceived as an incidence where the Smart CSOs Initiative constituted a biophysical reality. During the conference the participants communicated in diverse ways of interaction, which in turn was linked to their personal agendas, organizational mandates and expectations, as well as perceptions of the conference. By the means of various forms of discussions initiated by the facilitation team, such as the island style debate etc., the conference structure was very interactive and informal. This also initiated small bi- or multilateral conversations, for instance during discussion groups or during breaks. In this very fluctuating, tangled, and sometimes fuzzy environment agreements were made, one of the major ones being some form of project continuation to advance the Great Transition. I conclude that a common understanding on certain topics partly evolved through the formation of groups of people, either voluntarily or non-voluntarily, which can be understood through the notion of assemblages, as described by Escobar. Emphasizing the ability to interact with each other, different assemblages of actors, i.e. several participants were constantly forming groups. This not only enabled the conference contents and objectives to proceed, but also created an actual community of practice next to the virtual one online. Figure three attempts to visualize these forms of interaction and communication observed at the Smart CSOs Conference. The participants formed circular assemblages around key topics of their interest (as displayed in form of the small circles and the circular arrows).



Figure 3: Forms of Interaction and Communication at the Smart CSOs Conference



Source: Own illustration

Similarly, several interviewees had emphasized that enabling change requires time and space for people to really engage with each other’s thoughts (Interviews 5,9,2,3). In this sense, actual meetings of the community of practice’s participants in biophysical realities, such as the conference, seem to be essential for the participants to intellectually engage in the Smart CSOs Initiative. Certain participants were quite aware of this instance and in relation to that some interviewees mentioned the importance of new forms of learning and leadership, which move beyond limited linear thinking (Interviews 3,4). With regard to one of the core discussion groups, many participants and interviewees emphasized the significance of a global citizen’s movement. Many participants perceived the role of CSOs in this as vital, such as: “We cannot expect a global citizens movement to simply spontaneously emerge from the chaotic action of civil society” (Interview 5). With regard to the systemic dimension of how



change towards more sustainable societies might be constituted, several participants interviewed perceived change as both incremental and external to the current socio-economic system (Interviews 1, 23, 9, 2, 10). Another interviewee emphasized that the challenges of the future are too big to only look at the past to find solutions (Interview 2). Possible fields of actions, or windows of opportunity to enable change were such as a better collaboration between academia and CSOs through action research (Interview 4), new communication strategies (Interviews 4, 7) or system innovation (Interviews 2,3).

Furthermore, the dominating image of how sustainability was understood in the context of the initiative I would describe as being in opposition to the current unsustainable system, meaning that change away from these unsustainable patterns was agreed upon widely. Yet, the participants' opinions about how this change could look like or how it would be constituted differed in scales and content. For example, within the new narrative group that I helped to facilitate, the questions often were such as “What do we even understand of a new narrative?” or “What is the goal we want to achieve with a new narrative?”

In addition, by incorporating scientific findings, such as increased system thinking into the initiative's process, the Smart CSOs participants were demonstrating openness for both radically and reformist approaches. It was very essential to them to find practical examples of actions and models, which would facilitate action towards the Great Transition. Yet, often it seems they were lacking guiding practices or leading examples of how to implement these in their work. Also, a certain uncertainty existed about whether these actions would really make a difference or just serve the perceived unsustainable model of the current economy and society.



Another finding suggests that the initiative's objective, its core areas of concern and operation were quite complex to communicate to people outside the CSOs community³⁹. One reason for this could be the specific use of key terms and metaphors, which also shape the storylines of the initiative but which connections are not as easily comprehended by others. Also, the viral models of learning, whose significance was emphasized by several participants, is linked to this, as the organization of the Smart CSOs Initiative can be seen as having initially started with the thinking of a core group of people, which then emerged virally into ever wider circles⁴⁰. I would argue that the Smart CSOs Initiative's originators perceive the function of the Smart CSOs' community of practice also as a mediator between the first circle (as for instance the initiators of the first Smart CSOs workshop) and the subsequent circles – such as the circle of those demonstrating commitment for a continuation of the the Smart CSOs Initiative. The Smart CSOs conference report mentions for instance that this core group of people continuing the initiative also serves as “an external voice mainly in NGO/CSO fora on effective CSO strategies for the Great Transition” (Smart CSOs 2011c: 2).

6.3.1 Conclusions

Even though practical actions of changing the dominant socio-economic system were not specifically crystalized, most of the participants were highly engaged in learning and the desire to know more about how to take action to advance the Great Transition. However, not all participants were referring to the Great Transition in the same ways; some of them were rather unfamiliar with its usage. Overall, they could all relate some kind of understanding of it to the daily work in their organizations and they mostly connected it to their imaginations of

³⁹ This was noticeable when, for instance, new members joined the Ning forum or the conference. Often, similar initial discussions around topics and questions evolved, such as: what are practical examples for niche strategies, system thinking or narratives?

⁴⁰ This also relates to conference background paper (Narberhaus 2011: 37), when discussing ideas of how to initiate a global citizen's movement. In the paper it is referred to the “Widening Circle Model” suggested by the Tellus Institute that emphasizes „a phased process of organizational development, beginning with a relatively small group of committed people, supported by loose networks of individuals and organizations“ (GTI 2010: 4).



creating change towards transitions into more sustainable alternatives. Concerning the collaborative effort of the initiative, a high degree of cooperation and mutual knowledge exchange could be noticed in the initiative. Yet, as already indicated above, some actors were clearly dominating the discourses, which sometimes let some of the more subtle voices to perish. More dominant actors were for instance those who were more familiar with systems thinking, the idea of a new narrative, or the community of practice.

To sum up, in the very dynamic environment of the conference, assemblages of people and ideas arose by the discursive negotiation of the dominating arguments. These discourse coalitions resulted in the actual initiation of the Smart CSOs Initiative's continuation beyond the conference, which was envisaged prior to the conference. However, I conclude that due to the – among others – limited time of the conference, a rather broad, but less comprehensive common understanding was able to emerge, which was highly interrelated with the key opportunity areas of the initiative.

6.4 The Smart CSOs Initiative within Global Discourses and Assemblages

With regard to the world system perspective this research applies, the Smart CSOs Initiative is itself involved in the global system on various scales, in biophysical and also contentual realms and it can clearly be characterized as a Western⁴¹ project. For instance, in financial terms the initiative is connected to the global economy in the framework of an – at least initially – EU funded project. However, the Smart CSOs Initiative enters the global discourse on sustainability in a different manner than a single organization working on sustainability, as it is also an evolving project. Perceived from a global world system and assemblage perspective, the Smart CSOs Initiative takes place in a European network of organizations, connected by the organizations' previous projects, the Action Town Project, personal ties

⁴¹ Western is referring to the countries often characterized as belonging to the industrial nations of the world, such as Europe, the USA, Australia or Canada.



between the organization's representatives, and an open working collaboration network between the CSOs, especially in the United Kingdom. This means that the issues discussed are predetermined and bound by the specific geographical and contentual foci in which the initiative originated. Emphasizing certain issues or treating them in different manners, thus disregards other aspects, which often involves "contradictory notions", especially when examining it from a discursive perspective, as Hajer argues (1995: 78). This coincides with Hajer's thesis that "whether or not environmental problems appear as anomalies to the existing institutional arrangements depends first of all on the way in which these problems are defined" (1995: 4). Thus, from one perspective, the Smart CSOs Initiative defines environmental problems in a way, which makes them appear as opposing to the existing socio-economic system. From another perspective, the existing socio-economic system thus appears as not suitable to solve the environmental problems faced. Change towards sustainable alternatives, or in the words of the Smart CSOs Initiative, towards advancing the Great Transition, thus becomes the objective.

6.4.1 Conclusions

Overall, my findings suggest that various and different kinds of understandings of sustainable alternatives were widely spread among the participants. Each participating organization had a specific understanding of sustainability linked to their organization's agenda, but in general most demonstrated a rather open perception of sustainable alternatives, referring to the economic, environmental, and social dimensions as a whole. Even though some statements of the participants had been quite specific and might be characterized as, for instance, a clear consumerist approach within sustainable development, at other times these participants would refer to the overall systemic nature of the current problems at stake. Thus, the Smart CSOs Initiative cannot be distinctively classified within the discourses of reflexive ecological modernization and green radicalism, as the storylines among these discourses were at times correlating with and at other times opposing each other. However, having examined the ways in which the environmental problems are defined within the Smart CSOs Initiative, my results



imply that core ideas of reflexive ecological modernization and green radicalism are dominating within the initiative.

7. Concluding Remarks

The objective of this thesis was to receive a more in-depth understanding of the ways in which the participants of the Smart CSOs Initiative engaged in perceptions and visions of change towards sustainable alternatives and how this was connected to the notion of CSOs as agents of change. A central research result is that imaginations of change in advancing sustainable alternatives were underlying most statements, beliefs, discussions and discourses observed throughout the research. These forms of communication were however often based on the assumption that a common understanding of change was given. Yet, throughout my research, I observed various perceptions of change and agency of CSOs, which were often left undiscussed. Nevertheless, when considering the result of the Smart CSOs Conference – the longer-term continuation of the initiative in form of a strengthened Smart CSOs' community of practice – a mutual understanding of the importance of the project continuation had been formed. Within the perspective of Hajer's argumentative approach, this displays that in a very interactive and communicative environment, such as the Smart CSOs Initiative, often contradictory and compatible arguments are posed, which are able to form shared storylines and discourse-coalitions. This demonstrates that under certain conditions, assemblages of actors and ideas emerge, which manage to incorporate and negotiate arguments in such a way that collaborative understanding and learning becomes possible. Thus, to a varying degree, the negotiations within the Smart CSOs Conference resulted in an assumed common understanding, which in turn shaped the outcomes of the discussion groups and the conference. These various understandings of the participants of the Smart CSOs Initiative demonstrated linkages to various environmental discourses, yet not specifically to solely one. Nevertheless, the understandings were closely correlating with the discourses of (reflexive) ecological modernization and green radicalism.



From a global system perspective, the research results can be illustrated with the following quote: “We do not yet live in a risk society, but we also no longer live only within the distribution conflicts of scarcity societies” (Beck 1992: 20). Transferring Beck’s argument to this thesis, I want to conclude that among a majority of participants within the Smart CSOs Initiative the socio-environmental crisis was not identified as being solely based in distribution conflicts of resources between the affluent elite and the common. Above all, they perceived the essential approach to possible solutions in the question of ‘*who we are as human beings*’.

With regard to future research in the field of CSOs and their role as change agents, I would like to emphasize the importance of further studies that investigate the role of environments and assemblages embedded in discourses, in which CSOs negotiate their understandings and possibly generate common objectives. This research concludes that it is especially the happenings and phenomena in between so perceived main discussions or speeches, i.e. the ‘organic assemblages’ in between paired with dominating perceptions on the issues of interest that are vital in shaping the outcomes of such projects as the Smart CSOs Initiative.

Concluding in Tsing’s terms, “The knowledge that makes a difference in changing the world is knowledge that travels and mobilizes, shifting and creating new forces and agents of history in its path” (2005: 8).



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