

Manifesto for Transformative Social Innovation.



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An age of contradiction is upon us. People and nature are more globally interconnected than ever before, while also increasingly separated by old and new divisions. Scientific knowledge, technological innovation and legal structures have brought progress and previously unimaginable forms of comfort and entertainment. At the same time, there is severe poverty and inequality, ecological disasters, climate change, biodiversity loss and economic downfalls. The past years have been full of political turmoil over increasing divides in society, manifested in intercultural tensions, 'post-truth' media wars, and unprecedented protests and demonstrations. A series of raging wild fires and hottest days on earth in human history, followed by massive floods and storms, together with multiple political blasts and collisions, symbolise the conflagrations of our times. We recognize the struggles of humanity in addressing its challenges. Instead of being defeatist, however, this must bring a new wave of inspiration and vigour to encourage us to innovate how we see, interpret, and tackle the challenges that we face.

Let us begin by lauding how more and more people globally are taking their future and the planet's into their own hands and developing ways to shape radically more sustainable, just and resilient societies. We are writing this manifesto as people who participate, study and support such movements. While they may seem invisible or marginal to many, these communities implement social change everywhere across the globe in neighbourhoods, cities, and rural areas. From community energy initiatives, basic income experiments, cooperative banks and participatory budgeting, to ecovillages, co-working spaces, digital fabrication workshops, sharing platforms, agriculture cooperatives, urban labs and many more (find more examples here). These social innovations are changing social relations, leading to new ways of doing, thinking and organizing, and aiming towards a world based on ecological and human values, nurturing the commons and treasuring basic human rights and democracy.

Transformative Social Innovation

As top-down policies, technologies and large-scale solutions are unable to bring about social change at the level of everyday life, we need the efforts of local communities to engage and experiment with social innovations. However, local engagement and experimentation are also not enough. Societal challenges are interlinked and systemic. Piecemeal and superficial solutions, no matter how innovative, can easily have unintended side effects, reinforcing persistent societal challenges, or even creating new problems. Activism towards a better world is toothless if it fails to address existing power structures in the global economy and engage with people outside their own like-minded communities. This means that social innovation alone is not enough: we need transformative change to make a difference: to challenge, alter and replace the dominant institutions that are ingrained in society (e.g. individualism, hierarchy, competition). Such processes of challenging, altering and replacing our dominant ways of doing, thinking and organising, is what we call **transformative social innovation**.

We are in need of new stories to face the contradictions of our times and to imagine alternative futures. This Manifesto proposes transformative social innovation as a story of change towards a common future that is more sustainable, just and resilient. This story is inherently and deeply political. Politics is not just about voting or parliamentary debate: it also manifests as we build green houses, produce our own food and energy, envision alternative futures, reshape places or participate in decision-making. Such acts in themselves can be acts of defiance in trying to change systems of power, institutionalized interests and deeply engrained practices and beliefs. For social innovation to be transformative, it has no choice but to engage in politics and to do so honestly and firmly. This requires a strong set of basic principles and values, to take a stance against hijacking of social innovations by incumbent political systems. To this end we commit ourselves to discover what transformative social innovation means in our own city, neighbourhood, village, initiative, sector, organisation and personal life, and to share and spread these experiences in a way that makes them accessible and applicable for more people. While each context comes with its own stories and principles, we also share a set of shared principles, claims and commitments that enable us to collaborate.

13 Principles of Transformative Social Innovation

We uphold and commit to the following 13 principles of transformative social innovation (see an elaboration of the principles at the [end](#) of this document):

1. Physical and mental space for **learning and experimentation** is a necessary condition.
2. We require **alternative and diverse economies**.
3. Innovation is just as much about shaping the new as it is about **reframing the old**.
4. We need to experiment with **alternative social relations** and relational values.
5. Social & material change are intertwined: we need both **social & technological innovation**.
6. Transformative change requires **hybrid combinations** of civil society, state and market.
7. Social innovation should never be an excuse to dismantle **necessary public services**.
8. **Translocal empowerment** is a promising response to the challenges of globalisation.
9. Social innovation is about fostering a sense of **belonging, autonomy and competence**.
10. Transparent and **inclusive decision-making** is a necessary condition for change.
11. **Alternative and diverse narratives** are needed to drive change.
12. More **mutual recognition** and strategic collaboration is needed.
13. **Embracing paradoxes** is key to transformative social innovation.

We claim the right to innovate and foster transformative social change

We build on a long history of movements aiming to make this world more sustainable, just and resilient. We fully endorse and support such efforts as manifested in the [*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*](#) and the [*Sustainable Development Goals*](#). What we want to add and highlight with this manifesto is that human beings also have a specific right to innovate, to construct alternatives and to co-create social change in their environment. We claim everyone's right to:

- have a say in local, national and international research & development agendas and policies.
 - influence how public funds are spent.
 - gain access to labs, hubs, land & buildings in which to congregate, innovate & develop projects.
 - use technologies and platforms that are hackable, open and repairable by everyone.
 - be informed & educated in experimentation, innovation, transformative and critical thinking.
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A commitment and a call to action

Claiming our right to innovate and foster change implies that we also commit to collaborative action. Achieving transformative change in society requires that we ourselves transform. We call upon ourselves and upon you as activists, entrepreneurs, policy-makers, researchers, journalists and other critical intellectuals, or whatever role you play or position you have, to join us in making the following specific and general commitments.

Calling on activists and social entrepreneurs to commit with us to:

Collaborate.

We commit to collaborate and explore synergies within and across initiatives, both locally and globally. We welcome unlikely allies. Supporters can come in different roles and from different backgrounds. Whenever we can, we tell the story of our initiatives and listen to people's responses.

Be practical, but stay radical.

Sometimes we might play by the rules to change them. But while interacting with mainstream institutions, we remember to maintain our radical core and take time to keep that original fire burning.

Be reflexive.

We actively reflect on the potentially negative impacts and unintended consequences of our social innovation work and how to address them.

Lobby.

We organize our own lobbying activities to trace, challenge and/or support laws and rules that will inevitably have an effect on (the outcomes) of our work.

Be constructively critical towards public institutions.

We work with public institutions where necessary, and challenge them to improve where possible. We recognize that bureaucracies are also (at least partly) the result of collective democratic processes and attempts towards safeguarding equity, safety, and health.

Calling on policy-makers and politicians to commit with us to:

To allow, support and do social innovation.

We commit to create and support spaces for experimentation and learning. We support and do social innovation ourselves, and also *allow* for experimentation by others.

Not reinvent unnecessary wheels. When developing ‘hubs’ or ‘networks’ to connect people and ideas, we work with existing networks and initiatives instead of creating unnecessary new versions.

Be flexible.

We take into account that rules, regulations and assessments can contradict the flexible processes that social innovation initiatives might need. We commit to reconsider the rules and adapt them to changing societal demands, engaging social innovators in that process.

Uphold a proactive public sector.

We commit to defend, nurture and improve necessary public institutions and to promote calls for supporting social innovation from the policy side, with funds, grants, and specific policies, in an interactive, inclusive, and responsible way. A sound, transparent and reliable public sector that provides basic infrastructure and services and safeguards public interest is a prerequisite for meaningful social change.

Be inclusive.

We are wary of initiatives that are entirely self-enhancing, for-profit and not willing to share assets, benefits, and power (e.g. Uber). We support initiatives in creating and governing alternative platforms offering similar services in a more inclusive manner.

Calling on critical intellectuals (e.g. researchers, journalists, writers) to commit with us to:

Be socially engaged.

We make our work meaningful for society. We carefully frame our research with the people we are working with and think about the social outcomes. We are meaningful collaborators for those we are working with, be it through temporary reciprocal engagement or a long-term intellectual commitment.

Be honest about normativity.

We are aware of how our work influences the people and things we write and speak about. We are transparent about our own normative standpoints, and acknowledge how our own frameworks may limit our understanding. We dare to explicitly reflect on the interests underlying our work.

Be constructively critical.

We strike a balance between being inquisitive and supportive. We recognise the hopes and aspirations, as well as the concerns and fears, of the people we observe. We use participatory methods that allow others to express their experiences and ideas.

Be accessible.

We do not hide ourselves in ivory towers or our writings behind pay-walls. We are approachable and make our writings accessible to those who have provided their input.

Look beyond the obvious. Transformative social innovation exists not only in new, exciting projects, but also in less spectacular activities of lobbying, maintenance, improvisation and recovery. We develop a balanced account of the multiple origins of innovation and change. While we use the notion of transformative social innovation, we acknowledge that there are multiple other relevant notions on social change. We commit to bridging to other concepts and to remain critical of the limitations and pitfalls of 'innovation' and 'transformation' discourses.

Calling on everyone, whoever and wherever you are, to commit with us to:

Value diversity and explore synergies.

We value different approaches to social change across all initiatives, as long as the abovementioned 13 principles of transformative social innovation can be upheld. We accept the diversity of practices, solutions and visions that each in their right contribute towards alternative futures. We acknowledge the different roles, capacities and values that every individual can bring.

Be open-minded.

We are open towards alternative movements. We remember that many things that we consider normal or even indispensable today were not always so and often seemed impossible or outrageous at the time. Voting rights, organic food, solar panels, sex before marriage, the abolition of slavery – there were times when these things were only promoted or accepted by a small group of people who were considered crazy idealists (and there are places where this is still the case).

Contribute.

We choose what role we ourselves can play in contributing to social change. We seek to know which initiatives and networks for social change are present in our own environments. Whether we become an active member, give a donation, buy a product, or share something on social media... we commit to supporting them.

Embrace participatory decision-making.

Collective intelligence is often full of common sense.

Be appreciative, curious, and passionate.

We seek to understand the underlying values and motivations of others and to engage with one another in a critical yet constructive way. Passion is recognized globally and breaks down institutional barriers: by showing interest and finding out about each other's passions, we create space to express our own.

Elaboration of our Principles

1. Physical and mental space for learning and experimentation is a necessary condition.

People need spaces to experiment, to fail, to learn and to engage. Such experimental spaces (e.g. [Fablabs](#), [Hackerspaces](#), [Ecovillages](#), [Urban Living Labs](#)) often operate with principles that are diametrically opposed to the dominant ways of thinking in mainstream media and education: learning from failure, mutual learning, and improvisation are preferred to short-term success, individualism, superficial solutions, and excessive planning. We need to challenge the thinking that dominates our education systems and public discourses to create more space for learning and experimentation.

2. We require alternative and diverse economies.

Current economic systems are a source of many contemporary ecological and social challenges. People around the world are experimenting with alternative economies, including solidarity economy, social economy, social entrepreneurship, green economy, degrowth, sharing economy, circular economy, and many others. They collaborate in networks such as e.g. the [Intercontinental Network for the Promotion of the Social Solidarity Economy \(RIPESS\)](#), the [European Federation of Ethical and Alternative Banks \(FEBEA\)](#), the [International Co-operative Association \(ICA\)](#) and [Shareable](#). While there are considerable differences across alternative economy perspectives, they also share certain social and ecological values, a critique of capitalism and mainstream economic systems, and a commitment to changing existing power relations. We need to embrace the differences and complementarities of these alternative and diverse economies.

3. Innovation is just as much about shaping the new as it is about rediscovering and reframing the old.

Social innovation often means re-discovering, re-inventing, re-using, re-vitalizing and translating forgotten, lost or abandoned ways of doing, thinking and organizing of the past. Innovation is just as much about new combinations of old things, as it is about integrating new things into existing contexts. [Basic income](#), for instance, is an old idea which has inspired changes in tax and welfare systems. More recently, modern ICT and the innovative practice of crowdfunding are being put to creative use in circulating the idea and experimenting with it – turning a utopian concept into public engagement.

4. We need to experiment with alternative social relations and relational values.

Social relations, e.g. between neighbours, consumers and producers, employers and employees, policy-makers and citizens, are fundamental to how we live our lives. It is not enough to change what we do and the tools we use: we need to address the deeper levels of how we relate to one another. [Timebanking](#), for instance, replaces money-based transactions by a reciprocal service-exchange based on equality, reciprocity, and mutual help. There are no contracts between members, rather a relationship of trust. All services, however simple or sophisticated, are valued equally: the unit of exchange is the hours spent giving or receiving services. There are many other examples that promote such relational values of trust, reciprocity, equality, collectiveness, sharing, solidarity, inclusion and transparency. We commit to experiment with alternative relational values and practices, and to develop necessary group competences to build and maintain such relations.

5. Social and material change are intimately intertwined: we need both social & technological innovation.

Social innovation counter-balances a sole focus on the much celebrated technological innovations. Nevertheless 'the social' is not only shaped by human beings but also by mobile phones, computer viruses, climate change, genetically modified organisms, street signs, and so on. Technology, ecology, culture, economy and politics are all intertwined. We need initiatives that also tackle material, ecological and spatial matters when changing social relations and practices and that do so in a diversity of way. From e.g. [Seed Exchange Networks](#) (protecting biodiversity and defending seed freedom), [La Via Campesina](#) (fighting for the right to land and food sovereignty) and [INFORSE](#) (developing sustainable energy projects), to [Slow Food](#) (connecting food to local, sustainable development), the [DESIS network](#) (designing sustainable products and services), [Fablabs](#) and [Hackerspaces](#) (democratising the process of creating and making).

6. Transformative change requires hybrid combinations of civil society, state and market.

Changing relations between civil society, government and market are a form of social innovation in itself. Transformative social innovation involves multiple actors and institutions, and manifests in the changing interactions and blurring boundaries between them. Dominant institutions are not just about governments or big businesses; they also exist in civil society in our ingrained ways of doing, thinking and organizing. Social innovations are often born in civil society, but they also emerge from within businesses, universities (e.g. [Science Shops](#)) and governments. For instance, [Participatory budgeting](#) – the concept of citizens being involved in deciding how municipal budgets are spent – was initiated in Brazil

by the mayor of Porto Alegre. All of us can be social innovators, as community activists or entrepreneurs, as researchers or policy-makers, or as any combination in between.

7. Social innovation should never be misused as an excuse to dismantle necessary public services.

Social innovation should not replace the process of developing, maintaining or improving necessary public provisions. Even highly self-organized initiatives such as [Ecovillages](#) or [Transition Towns](#) need to draw intelligently and consciously upon public provisions. It is about sharing responsibility for the commons by challenging, changing and recombining public institutions so as to enable just and resilient living environments for all human beings. This includes responsibility for addressing unintended consequences of social innovation for public institutions. For instance, the notion of social entrepreneurship, as promoted by networks such as [Ashoka](#) or [Impact Hub](#), may come with unintended consequences, such as social enterprises being (mis)used to legitimise the abolishment of public services or to eliminate subsidies for non-profit organisations. We need more explicit debates about these and other unintended consequences of social innovation.

8. Translocal empowerment is a promising response to the challenges of globalisation.

Many social innovation networks are globally connected as well as locally rooted. Individuals are empowered by engaging with both local communities as well as international networks. We can't have effective international networks without local rootedness in communities, and vice versa. Translocal networks can integrate the best of both the global and the local, connecting communities internationally and promoting global solidarity while also acknowledging and re-appreciating deep local identities and traditions. By doing so, they can respond to current political debates on globalisation, immigration and nationalism. Examples of translocal alternatives need to be made more visible in these public debates.

9. Social innovation is about fostering a sense of belonging, autonomy and competence.

In addition to social-material needs (e.g. food, income, shelter), people seek for a sense of belonging (being connected to others), autonomy (acting in accordance with our own values) and competence (generating and experiencing skill and mastery). Social innovation initiatives that contribute to transformative change towards more sustainable, just and resilient societies, provide alternative ways for fulfilling these needs, thereby enhancing collective action and empowerment, and helping to overcome feelings of alienation, isolation or marginalization.

10. Transparent and inclusive decision-making is a necessary condition for change.

Social innovation initiatives apply innovative decision-making methods like multiple form of democracy (e.g. liquid, deep and deliberate democracy or ‘do-ocracy’), systemic consensus, sociocracy or holacracy. Such practices require shared ownership structures and a culture of open, transparent communication. Participatory decision-making depends on mature and socially competent individuals who are willing and able to take responsibility, to see the bigger picture and to be self-reflective and constructive in conflict situations. As such, social innovation requires space for social learning, capacity-building, and personal development. All this also means that well-established and functioning democratic institutions are a necessary precondition for transformative social innovation to flourish. This implies that in parallel to the experimentation with alternative democratic approaches, there is also a challenge to fight for basic democratic institutions in diverse ‘non-democratic’ geographical and socio-political contexts.

11. Alternative and diverse narratives are needed to drive change. Alternative narratives and theories of change are a pivotal driving force behind physical change: they serve to communicate and clarify why the world has to change, who has the power to do so and how this can be done. These narratives are not just about story-telling, as they also inform and direct physical action: how new houses are built, pieces of land are transformed, community-gardens are set-up, start-ups are born, products are made, new subsidy schemes are set up, and so on. Initiatives have different narratives, ranging from lifestyle change and inner transformation, to changing economic models and redesigning products, to political activism and fundamental institutional change. We appreciate the diversity and complementarities across different narratives of change, while also recognising commonalities in a commitment to relational values, community building and empowerment.

12. More mutual recognition and strategic collaboration is needed.

There are many commonalities that can be found across different networks and initiatives working on social change. However, a lot of complementarities still remain underexplored. Specific approaches to social change are often promoted at the cost of others, instead of stressing their complementarities and collaborating in a collective effort. Initiatives are often forced to focus on their own strengths, choose their own battles, and fight over scarce resources in order to survive. Some interesting network collaborations have already been started to tackle these challenges, as can for instance be seen in the case of [ECOLISE](#), the *European Network for Community-led Initiatives on Climate Change and Sustainability*, which brings together networks such as [Transition Towns](#), the [Global Ecovillage Network](#)

and several other organisations. We need more of these kind of meta-networks and spaces for encounter and reflection, including constructive confrontation and debate.

13. Embracing paradoxes is key to transformative social innovation.

Social innovation initiatives often strive to be inclusive and accessible, and tend to be critical of the exclusive character of the dominant institutions that they aim to replace. However, there is an inherent paradox of inclusivity and exclusivity in social innovation, which often starts small from a limited group of like-minded people. Even the most committed social innovators at times struggle to overcome deep divides in highly structured modern societies. In order to be transformative, we need to overcome cultural and social-political barriers and connect beyond the original context where we started out. To that end, we need to link to other movements that confront divisions in class, gender, culture, sexual orientation, and (dis)ability, so not only to be aware of the dynamics of exclusivity, but also to deal with them. In order to make social innovation more inclusive and accessible and in order to have transformative impact, innovation must go through some sort of mainstreaming process. During such mainstreaming, social innovation - by definition - loses some of its innovative characteristics and runs the risk of being captured by existing structures and interests. This paradox is inherent to all innovation. We need to have a portfolio of different and often paradoxical strategies, including *resisting, protesting, disproving, demanding, lobbying and disobeying, but also supplementing, compromising, complementing, circumventing, improving, collaborating, seducing and surprising*. These strategies need to be flexible, continuously adapting, updating and repositioning, so as to translate values and practices to a more mainstream context, while at the same time allowing us to hold on to our original core intentions.

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