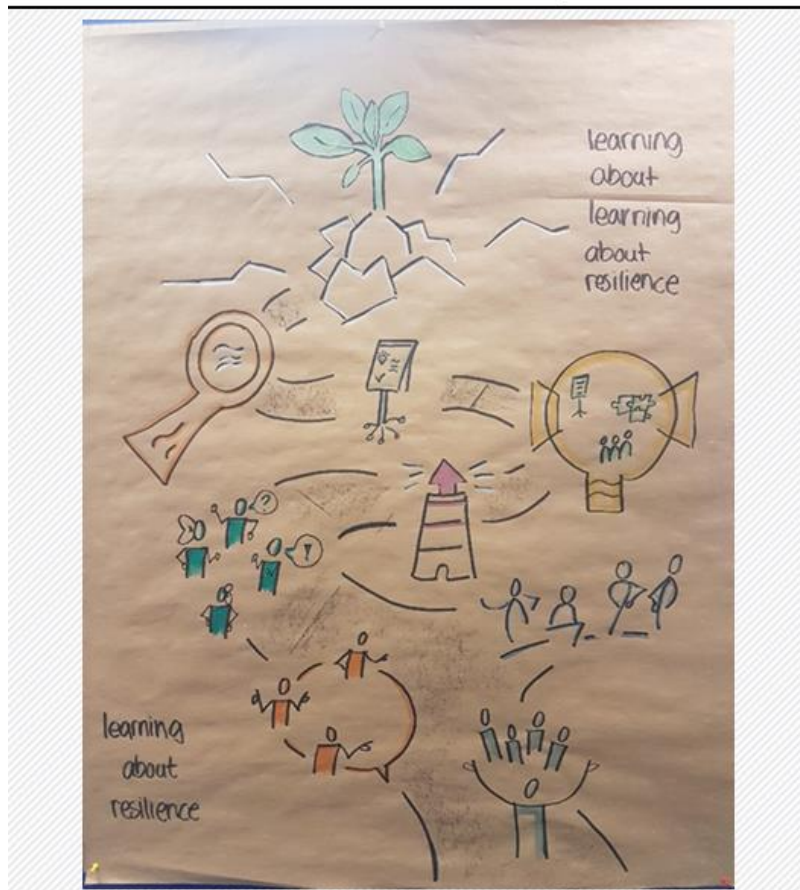


Review

Resilience in the face of multiple crises – Pathways and obstacles toward a resilient sustainability transformation

12th – 14th December 2022, Dessau-Roßlau, Germany

Process of the workshop Resilience in the face of multiple crises



* Pinboard used for the workshop

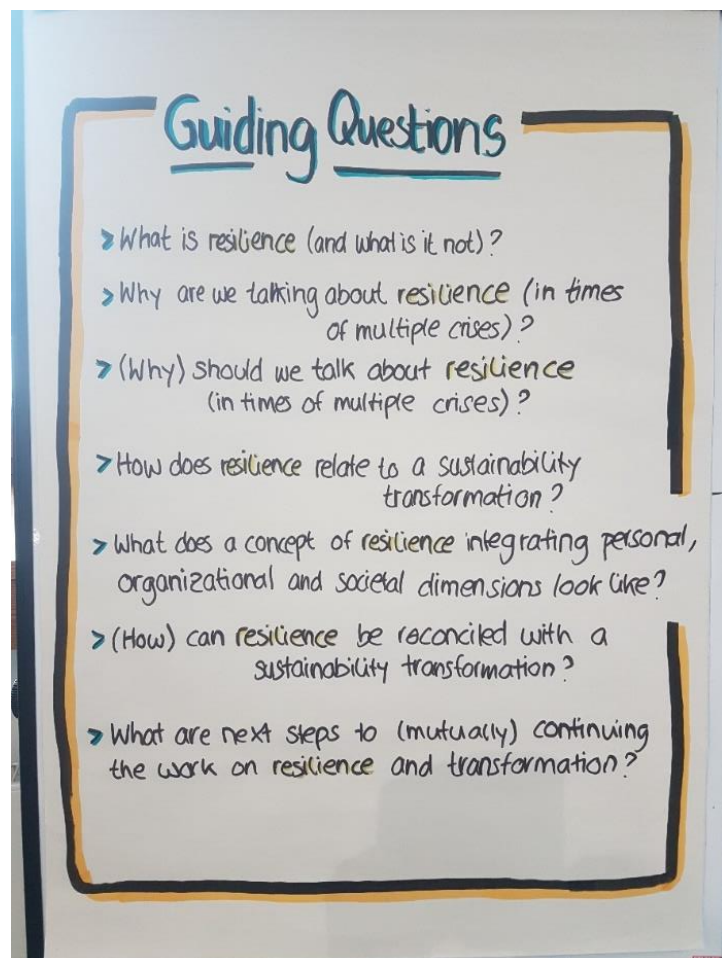
Source: German Environment Agency

Background

European societies have faced a series of fundamental challenges throughout the last years. The financial crisis some years ago and the Covid-19 pandemic already had deep impacts on people's daily lives, just to be overshadowed by reinforced existential insecurities resulting from Russia's war in Ukraine. Meanwhile, several regions have been severely hit by climate change impacts, for example in Germany by the flooding taking place in 2021. All of these events have revitalized a discourse on how societies, in general, can be designed in such a way that they are more resilient in the face of multiple crises and enabled to adapt to a changing climate. The German strategy for strengthening resilience against disasters exemplifies a recent attempt to systematically implement resilience on a political level in Germany.

At the same time, especially the impacts of Russia's war in have clearly demonstrated that Western lifestyles are highly dependent on fossil fuels and that this dependency constitutes one of the root causes leading to the currently unfolding crisis. Paradoxically, political measures foreseen to build a more resilient society in reaction to the current situation often come along with increased resource and energy demand too, again significantly relying on fossil fuels. In consequence, their intention to respond to a variety of risk scenarios may increase energy dependency and thus risk further fragilizing societies' abilities to cope with future threats in the mid- to long-term. Furthermore, fossil energy use to build resilience might simultaneously increase threats associated with climate change, highlighting a potential conflict between resilience and sustainable development.

Furthermore, crises such as wars, natural disasters like floodings and droughts, or pandemics do not only impact people on a material level, but exert direct stress on a psychological, interpersonal, and organizational level too. Technological innovations, political strategies and governance measures alone are hence not sufficient to respond to the multiple effects of crises and do not provide a comprehensive resilience strategy integrating the various dimensions on which these effects unfold.



The approach

As TES Academy, we are convinced that the multiple crises humanity is facing require a fundamental transformation of human relationship patterns with the more-than-human world. We think that this transformation cannot merely be considered as intellectual enterprises but may involve or even require a transformation of human modes of thinking and relating, behavioral patterns, and underlying mindsets. Furthermore, we consider transdisciplinary perspectives and collaboration key to developing solutions to the pressing sustainability-related challenges of our time, including developing an integrative vision of a resilient and sustainable future.

Therefore, it was our aim to create a space that allowed for mutual learning, relating, and collaborating. We wanted to invite participants to meet and connect at eye level, dive into new perspectives, and let novel, integrative approaches emerge that can ideally inform future specific projects and actions. Therefore, the schedule of our event was not fully determined and did not foresee the delivery of specific contents prepared in advance. Instead, we held that bringing together people with rich and diverse expertise constituted a unique opportunity to develop something genuinely new that cannot fully be planned beforehand.

Against this background, the TES Academy invited 25 international experts from different professional contexts (including resilience and sustainability researchers, mindfulness teachers and psychologists, as well as representatives from the civil society like ecovillage movement and environmental organisations, the German development cooperation, the German Ministry for the Environment, The German Environment Agency) to work on “resilience in the face of multiple crises” at the German Environment Agency in Dessau-Roßlau from 12th until 14th December. This composition has allowed us to approach the topic from a rich variety of viewpoints and think about resilience and sustainability transformation in a way that goes well beyond disciplinary boundaries.

The pedagogical design of the event was inspired by principles of Theory U¹. Instead of hastily entering into a problem-solving mindset, we wanted to understand the threats associated with the multiple crises not only intellectually but experience them emotionally and with all our senses. For this purpose, we dedicated the opening hour of the event to getting to know each other, before spending another hour sharing personal stories illustrating the participants’ personal relations with the topic of resilience. The first day was rounded with a 4D mapping of a specific project aiming at transforming an urban region in Western Germany toward a more resilient and sustainable future. While the mapping prompted a discussion as to whether this activity would reflect the real scenario at stake, it was successful in emotionally relating the participants to the workshop topic and preparing the affective ground for the remainder of the event.

The second day began with a case clinic. The case clinic has its origin in the framework of Theory U. It allowed participants to look at specific challenges related to the broader topic of resilience and collectively develop new perspective on these challenges. We looked at a variety of cases, ranging from vulnerable and irregular settlements in South Africa, to tensions between personal resilience and the vision of sustainability, to questions of resilience in the educational sector.

¹ Scharmer, O. (2018). *The essentials of Theory U: Core principles and applications*. Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

The case clinic was followed by a vision walk, during which participants imagined a resilient and sustainable future in their professional field. An open space, finally, gave the participants the opportunity to work on self-determined topics in self-organized groups.

On day three, the working groups shared and discussed the results of the open space, before we closed the event with a final feedback circle.

Getting to know each other

Building trust as a precondition for transformative collaboration.

Storytelling

Sharing stories illustrating participants' personal relation to the topic of resilience.

Mapping resilience

Using 4D-mapping to understand and perceive the topic as a whole person.

Case clinic

Looking at specific challenges in order to collectively develop new perspectives.

Vision walk

Imaging a resilient and sustainable future that guides future action.

Open space

Defining steps toward realizing a resilient and sustainable future.

Outcomes and process reflection

The working groups looked at different aspects related to resilience and sustainability more closely.

One group discussed the relation between personal and societal resilience and inquired into what primarily drives societal change (e.g., individual transformation vs. political decision-making). While the group agreed that individual transformation (through mindfulness practice, for example) constitutes an important factor to foster resilience and support a sustainability transformation, other participants were concerned whether an individual focus might promote egocentrism and, as such, hinders a broader transformation of our current lifestyles.

A second group thought about ecovillages as promising places to inspire political decision-makers and expose them to the lived reality of resilient and sustainable communities. Other participants questioned this approach, however. They argued that many political decision-makers are well aware of what a resilient and sustainable future could look like but doubted that such insights support these actors in their daily professional work.

A third group set out to specify a resilient and sustainable transport and supply system. A key challenge seemed to be that the resilience of current transport and supply systems is threatened by overconsumption and delocalized production systems. It was hence questioned that transport and supply can be transformed without transforming current consumption and production patterns – and hence without thinking about individual transformation processes.

A fourth group, finally, looked at new forms of learning and collaborating related to questions of resilience and sustainability transformation. They highlighted the importance of often overlooked qualities and success factors for such learning and collaboration processes, such as individuals' openness or trust among individuals. A question resulting from their work was how such qualities could be systematically addressed and evaluated.

Indeed, the latter topic was one that also underpinned the workshop as such and the work of the TES Academy team more generally. After all, the workshop was the attempt to facilitate transdisciplinary learning and collaboration on resilience and sustainability at eye level, integrating multiple perspectives on this multifarious topic. Our approach was rooted in the assumption that the quality of the knowledge exchange and generation process was dependent on the quality of the social relations and the individual, affective-motivational state the workshop activities could evoke. Indeed, the social relations and the overall workshop atmosphere was one of the most important strengths of the event highlighted by participants. At the same time, some participants missed explicit theoretical content and did not always understand the relevance of activities focusing on the bodily or affective dimension. Reconciling different forms of knowledges, experiential activities, and theoretical content hence turned out to be an important challenge of workshop formats such as ours.

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TES Academy - Transformation for Environment and Sustainability

German Environment Agency

Wörlitzer Platz 1


06844 Dessau-Roßlau, Germany


Tel.: +49(0)340 21 03-2963

www.tes-academy.de

tes-academy@uba.de

Internet: www.umweltbundesamt.de

 [/umweltbundesamt.de](https://www.facebook.com/umweltbundesamt.de)

 [/umweltbundesamt](https://twitter.com/umweltbundesamt)

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