



## Finding common ground in transformative sustainability narratives

It is widely acknowledged that global economic growth over the past half century, underpinned by a neoliberal capitalist discourse, has come at the cost of overexploitation of the world's resources, severe ecological degradation and growing inequalities. Efforts to move rapidly towards a more environmentally sustainable and socially just future will depend on the emergence of compelling new narratives and visions to drive the necessary transformation of economies, technologies and institutions, and more fundamentally, of human values and cultural norms.

This Knowledge Brief is based on a peer-reviewed article<sup>1</sup> that examines the literature on narratives of sustainability and identifies what they have in common and where they differ. The common ground between them can be seen as the building blocks of an alternative narrative that might be powerful enough to challenge the dominance of the neoliberal capitalist discourse.



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### Narratives and discourses

Humans find and create meaning in the stories they tell about themselves and their societies. The deep or overarching stories that give meaning to our collective life can be called 'narratives', and various terms exist to describe the elements and levels of these narratives.

- **Meme:** the building block of a narrative or discourse; a replicable idea that can be transmitted.
- **Story:** a unique sequence of events with a plot, direction and characters. Stories weave memes together.
- **Narrative:** definitions vary along a spectrum, from a simple story to a complex discourse; it can be thought of as the deep story that emerges from the repeated telling of similar stories.
- **Discourse:** at the highest level, a web of meanings and ideas that constitutes a shared way of understanding the world and contains or reproduces a main 'storyline' or narrative.

Discourses and narratives offer a shared language, and form a basis for mutual understanding and practice, but also impose limits on imagination. Discourses can make a situation seem inevitable or right. The terms 'discourse' and 'narrative' are often used interchangeably. Finding a shared narrative can give meaning to collective action, as in the idea of 'discourse coalitions' – groups of like-minded opinion-leaders and other actors who defend and promote particular discourses or narratives.

## Neoliberal capitalism and the emergence of alternative discourses

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The neoliberal capitalist discourse that has held sway for at least the past 40 years is under obvious strain; however, no alternative narrative has accumulated sufficient support to challenge it. Even discourses advocating for environmentally friendly reforms that would essentially be compatible with neoliberalism (framed as sustainable development, ecological modernization or green growth) have failed to influence a significant change in the dominant narrative.

Sustainability narratives have been multiplying since the 1970s, with the emergence of the idea of ecological limits to growth. Sustainability discourse today comprises a spectrum of narratives, united by a commitment to sustain human life on Earth but differing on what is required to achieve it, with nuances ranging from neoliberalist reformism to radical social change. The inherent contradictions in the sustainability narrative are evidenced in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which embrace social justice, human wellbeing and ecological integrity, but retain a commitment to economic growth.

In this time of instability and transition, when old stories are losing their grip but new ones have yet to take hold, the time is ripe for an effort to coalesce and organize around the common ground in transformative sustainability narratives. The very history of how neoliberalism became dominant demonstrates that consciously and regularly repeated ideas or memes can produce highly influential discourses.

## Common and conflicting themes in transformative sustainability narratives

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A review of the literature reveals several common ideas about deliberate transformations to sustainability. While there is a heartening degree of consensus on the desired endpoints of

transformation, the most effective strategies to achieve them are more contentious.

Common ground can be found in such ideas as new economics, which emphasizes human wellbeing and dignity rather than gross domestic product (GDP) as a measure of development. Global ethics represents a similar narrative that advocates for a future based on justice, peace and ecological integrity. Futurists promote alternative discourses by developing scenarios that depart from the dominance of neoliberalism. These blend with ideas drawn from the arts, humanities and philosophy. Another source of new discourses can be found in scholarship on individual and collective worldviews, which traces the evolution of ideas to embrace a more holistic and inclusive perspective.

While many sources of alternative narratives are rooted in the Global North, indigenous cultures from the South are also rich in ideas. These include decolonial and post-development discourses, such as the Latin American concept of *Buen vivir* ('good living' in harmony with nature) and the Bantu philosophy of *Ubuntu*, which emphasizes human interdependencies.

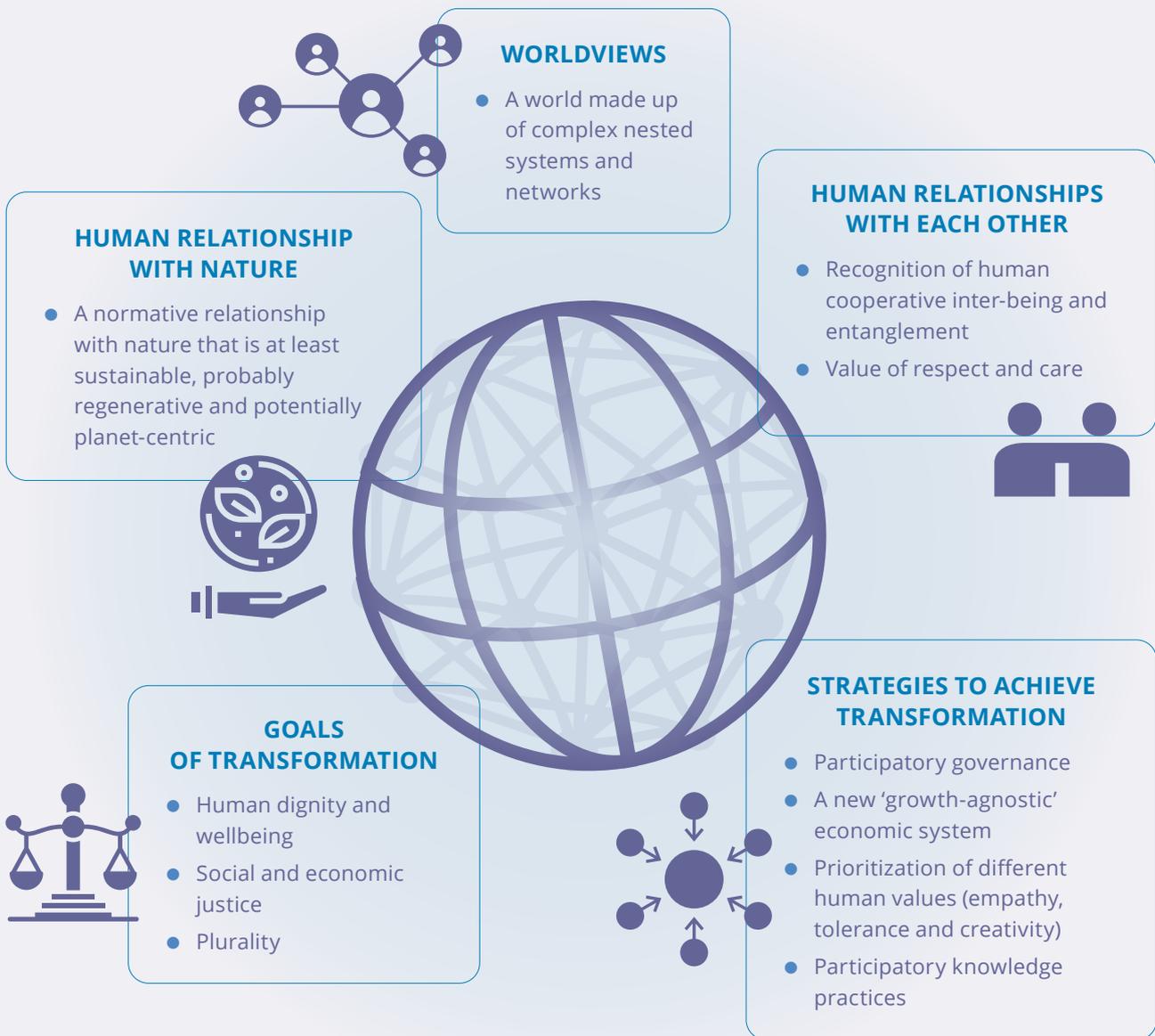
The common ground across all these alternatives can be summarized in five memes: worldviews, the human relationship with nature, human relationships with each other, the goals of transformation, and strategies to achieve transformation (see diagram for more details). These could form the building blocks of a storyline that would mobilize a discourse coalition to challenge neoliberalism.

There are also tensions between the various alternative discourses. While these may act as barriers to the formation of discourse coalitions, they can also provide a basis for constructive dialogue. The areas of conflict relate mainly to the extent to which human relationships need to change, the future of capitalism, whether sufficiency is an appropriate economic goal, and how to most effectively pursue deliberate transformations.

To navigate through the current stage of discursive transformation, sustainability scholars could consider the following issues in an action-oriented research agenda:

- the role of human agency in the process of discursive transformation

# Building blocks or memes for an alternative transformation narrative



- the need to critique and communicate about the contradictions and poor outcomes delivered by neoliberal capitalism
- the need to identify and communicate about areas of agreement while allowing for diversity and plurality
- the need to test and evaluate experiments in realizing the ideas embedded in alternative discourses (e.g. economic experiments)
- the need for research and practice to pursue participatory knowledge production processes to help shape the required new narratives
- the need to ensure equitable participation in shaping emerging discourses.

## Conclusions: The seeds of transformation

The significant common ground identified through the study of alternative narratives offers hope of developing a new shared story to guide the transformation to a more sustainable future. The ideas identified can be viewed as the seeds of such a transformation, with more work needed to nurture them through a time of great uncertainty and disruption.

## Key messages

- Neoliberal capitalism retains its position as the dominant discourse guiding human affairs, but this is an opportune time to seek discursive transformation, since old stories are losing their grip and new ones have yet to take hold.
- Alternative transformation narratives have many elements in common: a view of the world as made up of systems and networks; a relationship with nature that is sustainable, regenerative and planet-centric; human interdependence and cooperation; the goals of human wellbeing, justice and plurality; and agreement on the value of participatory governance, a new economic system, prioritizing different human values and participatory knowledge practices as potential strategies for transformation.
- The points of conflict between the different narratives relate to how much the human relationship with nature needs to change, the future of capitalism, what appropriate economic goals are, and how to pursue deliberate transformation. While these may act as barriers to the formation of discourse coalitions, they can also provide a basis for constructive dialogue.
- Transformations to sustainability could be supported by improving knowledge on the role of human agency in narrative shifts, articulating and building on the common ground between critics of neoliberal capitalism, testing new economic proposals and ensuring that underrepresented and marginalized people have opportunities to participate in the shaping of new narratives.

## Endnote

- 1 Riedy, C. (2020). 'Discourse coalitions for sustainability transformations: Common ground and conflict beyond neoliberalism.' *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 45: 100–112.

This Knowledge Brief is one of a series based on recent peer-reviewed research on social transformations to sustainability. For more information and citation details, the article on which it is based is available at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2020.09.014>. The Knowledge Brief has been prepared by the International Science Council (ISC) Transformations to Sustainability (T2S) programme secretariat in collaboration with Chris Riedy. The views it expresses do not necessarily represent those of the International Science Council, nor of the programme's funders, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). For any questions regarding this document, please contact Chris Riedy, [criedy@uts.edu.au](mailto:criedy@uts.edu.au).

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