

Key Concepts in Processes of Sustainability Transformation

SENSEMAKING

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DEFINITION

Sensemaking can be defined as the act of "structur[ing] the unknown so as to be able to act in it" (Ancona, 2012, p. 3). It involves generating meanings, testing them in practice and, if needed, refining or replacing them by understandings that are more suitable. By the help of sensemaking, the complexity and unpredictability of the world can be made comprehensible. Key individuals are vital for advancing learning processes through sensemaking. By articulating new meanings, they initiate the adaptation to changing environments and facilitate directed action. Due to its focus on learning and orientation towards actionable outcomes, sensemaking can be understood as a knowledge-based solution-generating mechanism.

CONTEXT

Karl Weick, an American professor for organizational behaviour and psychology, introduced the concept in the 1970s. Ever since, it has been used as an organizational behaviour concept that is increasingly linked to the field of information systems. As decision-making in companies is supported by information systems and technology, sensemaking is seen as a data-intensive approach to organizational learning. Inside organizations it is particularly used by decision makers, who are in need of a structured process of dealing with ambiguity and uncertainty. The concept has also been used in the field of education and (transformative) learning, where it is generally conceptualized as "mak[ing] meaning" (Mezirow, 1990, p. 1). Individuals learn by interpreting and acting upon experiences. Interpretation, in turn, is guided by each individuals' frame of reference. The research field thus establishes a close link between sensemaking and other concepts such as frame of reference, belief systems, reflexivity and discourse, amongst others. In the context of sustainability, previous research has highlighted the importance of (managerial) sensemaking of sustainability for making purposeful decisions. The concept has also been linked to

sustainability transformation. Here, sustainable entrepreneurs and other key individuals use a fundamentally new approach to sensemaking to discover and advance radical sustainability innovations (Westley et al., 2011).

RELEVANCE

Any deliberate attempt to steer transformation requires an understanding of what needs to be changed and why. Particularly for processes of sustainability transformation, which are inherently complex and aim for an explicit and radical deviation from an unsustainable status, making new sense of the world is essential. As sensemaking involves "acting thoughtfully" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 412), transformative change can be initiated by simultaneously interpreting knowledge with trusted frameworks and rejecting these frameworks through testing new interpretations. Transformation therefore always starts with small experiments before being broadened across the larger system.

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