

The World Citizens Movement – Old Paradigms and New Narratives of Change

About the Essay

In this essay I will present an inspiring transnational network that was founded in 2013: The *World Citizens Movement*, which is based on the idea of a global social movement for transformative change. By finding new narratives of change and of being with each other in a shared planet the movement challenges the paradigm of *modern development*. I will critically explore this paradigm and tackle it with different approaches of thinking as shared within the World Citizens Movement.

Getting us in the Mood for a Transformative Read:

But first of all I'd like to take you on a little journey towards the stars - from where we can see clearer. In a speech, this would be the moment where I ask you to close your eyes and just listen to my words so as to let your imagination flow. As this would be very unwise to ask of a reader in an essay I kindly ask you to get comfortable and go on reading:

Imagine yourself to be an astronaut in a rocket, just ready to launch for outer space. You hear the countdown 10,9,8...and feel the humming sound and vibrations of the loading boosters...7,6,5,4...you are thrilled and hold your breath...3,2,1 – go! An inferno breaks out below you and off you go slowly. You feel the immense force, being pressed into your seat by the high acceleration. The noise around you is overwhelming...After just some breaths you pass the stratosphere and you feel gravity declining, your body getting lighter. Than the boosters go off and there is absolute silence like you've never experienced before. You hear nothing but your calm breath. Lightness beholds of your body which hovers in zero gravity, still held back by the seat belts. You loosen the belts and with just a tiny push you let your body flow towards the window. You look outside. Out there below the ship you see earth. You are stunned by how beautiful she looks. Also, by how tiny, vulnerable and precious she looks from up here. You feel overwhelmed by love for mother earth, with her glowing warmth in the middle of cold and dark. And a thought strikes your mind: What the f*** have I been doing down there? How the f*** did we get to the point where we are? And why did I have to travel 100km in a rocket, burning 3Mio liters of fuel to realize that?

Stopping our little journey here, I invite you back down to earth. The helpful thing that we might want to keep from this diversion, however, is both the love for our planet and the critical distance to what we are doing on it.

The World Citizens Movement: Background, Process, Aspirations

The notion of *Global Citizenship* is centuries old: the cosmopolitan idea of considering oneself as a citizen of the world, bound in solidarity with all other humans, instead of identifying with a particular country only. Unity in diversity is the underlying philosophy and the term *citizen* (instead of human or person) is used as it implies both rights and responsibilities which, in the case of *global citizenship*, than apply to every human being.

The idea of a *Global Citizens Movement* is a bit younger. In the discourse about a Great Transition, meaning a radical systemic transformation towards a state of global justice and sustainability, people for a while have seen the need for something like a Global Citizens Movement as a central agent of change: a global social movement (a movement of movements) that is able to mobilize people in mass with an alternative vision that can generate enough power to drive systemic change from below.

In 2013 some international civil society alliances (Concord, CIVICUS, GCAP among others) endeavored to build such a movement. For that a series of global conferences were organized, bringing together several hundred actors from different social movements (Occupy, Arab Spring, Transition Towns, Rights of Nature, Indigenous Movements, La Via Campesina and others) and organized civil society (professional NGOs that do Lobbying, Campaigning and Awareness Raising on global social justice and sustainability). The events aspired to explore the ways towards and the potential of a Global Citizens Movement (later renamed in World Citizens Movement). The more concrete aspirations for such a movement were:

- Bridging the gap between social movements, that are often unorganized, and organized civil society that often lost its connection to the people's basis and its ability to mobilize. Forming something like a meta-network / movement uniting the respective efforts under a common vision of another world.
- Facilitating knowledge transfer and learning from each other – sharing visions for a different world that has to be invented yet.
- Tackling the crisis of meaning by nourishing and distributing promising stories of change and alternative social practice.
- Providing an inspiring frame of reference for one's activities, distinguished from and beyond the mighty framework of the international development agenda.
- Coordinating and streamlining strategies, speaking together with a loud voice while at the same time appreciating the diversity of approaches.
- Experimenting with participatory forms of democracy / collective leadership within the movement.
- Stirring motivation through a spirit of togetherness: doing things in one's local context with reference to a bigger picture; knowing that other people elsewhere are fighting for similar goals (idea of a translocal dialogue).

So far so good. The big BUT that might have occurred to you already is: Can you really *plan* a movement, especially in combining so different actors and with the biggest of all aspirations: of changing the world? The answer probably is no. Hence, not a big surprise that no mass movement was born out of the World Citizens Movement process either (yet). However, it led to the foundation of a very active network with which more and more activists in North and South identify. Probably because some things happened during the network events – or spaces of dialogue– that are very special and distinguish it from other international conferences:

At the first conference in Johannesburg debates were heating up, the usual buzz words were thrown around and people started getting frustrated and realized that this conference would never lead to a valuable outcome that everybody can agree to or that it will just produce one more worthless piece of paper. Then, as people report, at the peak of controversy a moment of literal silence occurred which did some magic to the people present. One of the front activists, Bayo Akomolafe, found words for it: "Ladies and gentlemen, the time is urgent, we need to slow down". He means that in times of crisis, when we feel the urge of quick responses and sudden action, our solutions are most likely to be based on just the same patterns of thinking that created the problems in the first place. Hence, despite our wonderful intentions we often reproduce the problems that we actually want to solve. We are caught in a box. So what we have to do first of all is to sit back and relax, to really start observing critically what we are doing, to learn to perceive the walls of our boxes and find ways to glimpse beyond. We have to start asking new questions instead of always seeking for straight answers: What the heck is going on and why, how did we get to this point and how

can we really get out of it? We just have to admit that we do not have the answers yet. In an ever-accelerating world there must be no rush on the path to a better future. This spirit united the activists of the World Citizens Movement and they embarked on this endeavor together. Accordingly, no declaration pretending to have straight answers was passed but a document, identifying some questions that have to be explored together in thinking, but especially in practice (*The Johannesburg Compass: Questions and Orientations*).

Trapped in the Space between Stories: Old Paradigms and Emerging Narratives of Change

It is obvious for more and more people: Our old answers and tools work no more, if they ever have at all. The story of economic and growth led development, following the western model, didn't close the deal for poor countries and also in rich countries brought about immense social and ecological negative side effects. Both analysis and common sense prove that our monocultural development model failed at almost every end and will ultimately lead to the destruction of life on earth if we continue with it. But still the story, that I like to call the *myth of modernity*, is extremely powerful in telling us what is right to aspire and how we must do it. Even if we knew that this model is flawed, even if we were aware of the fatality of our actions it is still very difficult to change the way we feel, think and act - what we grew up to believe, what was written into our hearts and minds. We do not have another powerful story yet that goes beyond a critique of the present, drawing a vision of an alternative future that exists beyond the logic of today and that we can seek without being afraid. This is what Bayo Akomolafe, a Nigerian storyteller and psychologist, calls the *Space between Stories*. It is a crisis of meaning and a battle of stories: The single story of modernity and development against emerging different narratives of beingness and of change.

That brings us closer to the core of the problem which according to Akomolafe "is not the system but the culture that built the system": The current system is not coincidence, bad luck, given by nature or the creation of a few powerful conspirators who profit from it. Rather it is based on certain cultural values that collectively developed over time and along with it, and much deeper enrooted, on certain paradigms that (unconsciously) rule our thinking. It is exactly because of those paradigms that new narratives have a hard time emerging. Our *mental infrastructure*, as German philosopher Harald Welzer calls the narrow frames of our thinking, hinders us from imagining another kind of world, another kind of being, another way of organizing human life with respect to all beings and the planet. It makes us fall into the same traps over and over again. Hence, we have to dismantle the underlying paradigms of our thinking in order to be able to re-invent our being with each other on this earth. That is a huge task as a paradigm shift does not mean looking up instead of down (which we might call a shift of perspective). It means to change our very notion of what *up* and *down* means.

Johannes Krause from the World Citizens Movement identified some powerful paradigms that our thinking is based on (*Transformation*, 2014). As unveiling something is the first step for fighting it I would like to present parts of Krause's helpful analysis, with some amendments of my own. Note: certainly (and luckily!) not everything holds true for every individual, but displays a dominant pattern:

1. The idea of **linear development**: The belief that things have to get bigger, faster, better, more efficient to solve all our needs and problems and the idea that everything grows in the same direction, which is, as a matter of course, the direction of the heavily industrialized countries. Alternative paths, knowledge systems and ways of being, through colonialism, were and are still devalued as primitive or irrelevant. Everything is streamlined to follow that path.

2. The linkage between maximizing **material wealth and well being**. Or more, that individual material possession *is* well being. Along with it the widespread conviction that capitalist market economy as one of many (and maybe the worst) ways of organizing productive interaction between humans goes without alternative. Even if we were critical about capitalism in its current form or see it as a root cause, we have difficulties leaving the logic underneath and abandoning the material aspirations linked to our idea of a good life.
3. Getting deeper: **Dualistic Thinking**. The thinking in binary oppositions where one thing is only thinkable as different from a confronting other. For example, right / wrong, good / evil, black / white, male / female, adult / child and so on. A very important aspect is the distinction of nature versus culture: The disconnection of humans from nature and the subordination of nature: men as lords of the planet, as masters of the universe. This bipolar thinking heavily translates into the system: economic competition with winning and losing, politics (competing parties for government and opposition), the judicial system with courts of law, schools (with competition and their absolute marks: get it or not), economy versus environment. Example where also NGOs reproduce this thinking: Lobbying for more environmental protection measures. Great idea but the problem is that we *have to* protect the environment in the first place. I don't want to live in a world with more environmental protection. I want to live in a world where we don't need that because our economy, our way of using resources, would never harm the environment because that would feel like hurting ourselves. One might argue that this kind of binary thinking is a human universal as our brain functions that way. But as there are cultures, societies that have a more holistic thinking, trying to bring all concerned into a good balance, seeking consensus, regarding humans as part of a bigger whole that needs to be respected, we can see that also this way of thinking is a social construct, developed by but not given to humans.
4. **Objectivity and Rational Thinking**. The assumption that there is something like an objective truth and neutral knowledge, while actually truth is a social construct and what is seen as truth and hence becomes truth is linked to power. With power being as it was in the last 500 years, the western and Eurocentric knowledge system becomes universal knowledge (whereas actually reality is a multitude of stories and truth a question of perspective).
5. **Instrumentality and Utilitarianism**: The obsession with measurable results, outcome, and mostly short term, orientation. The belief that you can plan everything – and that everything has to be planned. The assumption that doing something better and better will lead to good. Also the looking for immediate personal benefits.
6. **Fragmentation**: as an analytic way to understand the world by categorizing it. Seeing things in their distinction, not their connection. For example health sector, educational sector, economic sector, environmental sector. An ongoing specialization, fragmentation in microparts with microexperts (NGOs are as guilty of it). The problem is: an improvement in one sector might have adverse effects in another sector. This fragmentation impairs a systemic view and it stands in the way of big visions.

The line of thinking vaguely described by those paradigms goes back to a European school of thought and I am also writing that from a White European perspective. However, colonialism, including the spread of the capitalist world economy and the western cultural hegemony in a globalized world have spread these value patterns throughout the globe.

Today almost every society has bought into the story and promises of *modernity*. So the European narrow-mindedness has become a problem of the whole human civilization. Good news is: there were and are hundreds of alternative beliefs, models and practices out there. They have been systematically devalued or blanked out while actually they might be of essence for the future. We just have to look for and listen to those who have something different to say or who do things differently: Think of philosophies like Mother Earth (Pachamama) in Latin America, Ubuntu in Africa and so many examples of a different social practice that people start experimenting with to make a change. Maybe we find some examples of that next door. The world is still abundant with beautiful things.

The Mental Challenge for a Transformative Social Movement

Successful social movements of the past (Decolonization, Anti-Apartheid, Anti-Slavery, Civil Rights Movement) were about liberation. They had a clear vision of what they wanted to liberate from. For us today, despite being in such a deep crisis, the answer what to liberate us from is not so obvious. We lack a clear opponent, an external other for our struggle. In the end, it is ourselves, our dearest beliefs and most comforting truths that we are to liberate from.

The Case for Another Education

For the cultural change that we need education plays an important role. Transformative Learning means unlearning those paradigms, which if we like it or not are the hidden core values of our current culture. As the current formal education systems and its idea of learning rather condition people to fit into the system than to critically question and transform it we need new forms of education.

Education should be about liberation and emancipation. It should irritate patterns of thinking, empower people to change themselves and inspire them to engage in collective action and make a change in the world. For us educators and activists it implies the challenge to find the right tools and methods to facilitate such learning processes, developing an education for the future.

Listen to more ideas on education from activists of the World Citizens Movement in my film "Learning Transformation – Voices for Another Education":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0FeXrwf0YPM>