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Action-centred design to find opportunities in times of multiple crises: Designing a toolkit from a participatory conference

Alastair Fuad-Luke, Seçil Uğur Yavuz, Corinna Sy, Jennifer Schubert, Kris Krois

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Action-centred design to find opportunities in times of multiple crises: Designing a toolkit from a participatory conference

Abstract

The global crisis around the COVID-19 pandemic raises questions about our societal conditions while amplifying the challenges of our existing multiple crises to wider questions of sustainability. Such crises, which are both threat and opportunity, have been highlighted for 50 years within the design domain which has re-orientated towards ideas of ecological, social and economic transition and transformation. Against this background, a 7-year old conference series, presciently called By Design or By Disaster, had to convert to an online format during the COVID-19 lockdown in Italy. Applying eco-social and participatory design principles the participants of the conference, Beyond Crisis, co-created 21 parallel workshops tasked with the aim of each generating three actions on diverse topics reflecting the interests of the participants. Live reports and synthesis of the actions generated a broad mapping of the situation to help build a spirit and momentum for social-ecological transformation through design. Subsequent analysis of the content of the workshops and actions led to the development of a prototype opensource toolkit, the Toolkit for Designing Actions in Times of Multiple Crisis, that facilitates the creation of action plans with multiple actors. This toolkit for *action-centred design* has the potential to help diverse actors deal with multiple crises while simultaneously helping reconfigure our societal and human to other-than-human relations by materialising *preferable* rather than probable or possible futures.

Keywords: Action-centered design, Diverse actors, Multiple crises, Toolkit, Transition, Social-ecological transformation

Transition and transformation in times of multiple crises

As the (still unfolding) realities of the COVID-19 pandemic reveal the fragility of our systems and infrastructures, questions asked of our societal condition over the last 60 years rise to the surface once again but with a new urgency. The pandemic amplifies the challenges as a phenomenon of our multiple crises - climate warming, destruction of biodiversity and habitat, the externalised costs of a neo-liberal global economic system and more (multiple crises reference). As the philosopher Antonio Gramsci sagely observed, crises destabilize socio-economic relations and cultural narratives of hegemonic regimes while simultaneously opening opportunities for the emergence of new symbolic and social possibilities (Gramsci, 1971). Against the dramatic, generational event of the current pandemic, the need to ask critical questions about how we embark on urgent social-ecological transformation is pressing. Here we adopt Driessen et al.'s definition of 'societal transformation' as 'alterations to society's systemic characteristics and encompassed social, cultural, technological, political, economic and legal change' (Driessen et al., 2013, 2 cited in Brand, 2016). Brand acknowledges that there are many possible definitions of transformation because as a diverse concept it has 'broad containers and epistemic terrains' that depend upon implicit or explicit assumptions and on cognitive interests (Brand, 2016, p. 4). Nonetheless, these observers highlight the huge ontological, epistemological and cultural challenge that transformation represents to human societies.

Notions of transition to more sustainable ways of living, working and modes of being through design have a long root of advocacy through ecological and social design in the 1970s, promoted by Victor Papanek, Tomas Maldonado, Ian McHarg and others (Papanek, 1974; Maldonado, 1972; McHarg, 1969). They believed that designing has to be cognisant of human and ecological needs and be underwritten with new political, economic and design value systems to respond to contingent realities. In the last 20 years, these earlier design theories and practices were linked with the concepts of Design for Sustainability (DfS)

(Charter & Tischner, 2001; Manzini & Jegou, 2003), sustainable product services systems (Roy, 2000), transformation design (Burns et al., 2006), design for social innovation (Chick, 2012; Hillgren et al., 2011; Manzini, 2014), design activism (Fuad-Luke, 2009; Thorpe, 2012), transition design (Irwin, 2015; Irwin et al., 2015) and other emergent theories and practices. However, there has generally been little engagement from the design disciplines with transition management theory developed by various Dutch scholars such as Geels, Schot, Kemp, Loorbach and others from the early 2000s onwards and transformation perspectives from other disciplinary fields that try to better understand and map how societies can change themselves. A key theoretical model underlying transition towards more sustainable development is the framework of the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) identifying the socio-technical landscape, regime and niche innovators.

Exploring and questioning the role of design, designers and designing in societal transformation is pivotal to teaching and research at the Faculty of Design and Art in the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, South Tyrol, Italy. Since 2015 it has operated a Master in Eco-Social Design and 2018 formed a research cluster entitled “trans-form” (Fuad-Luke, 2020) focused on ‘exploring design, art and social practices addressing political and eco-social issues’. As a core part of the curriculum activities, the Masters students and teachers co-curate an annual conference called By Design or By Disaster (DoD) (2020) - a prescient naming given the ongoing circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. The first DoD conference, focusing on the transformative role of eco-social design practices in the transition towards more sustainable ways of living and working, was launched in Bolzano in South Tyrol in April 2013. Since then, except for the year 2014, it has been an annual conference steadily building an audience and a network of hundreds of researchers, designers, artists, NGOs, and others from Italy, Germany, Austria and other EU member states. The focus is on the dissemination of new practices, case studies and initiatives complemented by keynote talks, mini-talks, open workshops (suggested and facilitated by the participants), performances and other activities aimed at maximising discourse between the participants in a convivial approach and situation. Since 2018 DoD has partnered with the Hier und Da festival in the village of Mals/Malles in the Obervinschgau/Sopra Val Venosta, South Tyrol, Italy. Mals/Malles is a village renowned in South Tyrol and internationally as a community who rejected the use of pesticides in the municipality through a referendum and its resistance to the dominant agricultural infrastructures, systems and policies (Ackerman-Leist, 2017). The community runs the Hier und Da festival (Hier und Da, 2020). As a result of the COVID-19 lockdown in Italy in March DoD20, scheduled for April 2020, was postponed to 1-4 October 2020. Yet the opportunity was seized in April 2020 to create an online conference, entitled “Beyond Crisis” to open up questions as to the threats and opportunities presented to transition to more sustainable societies and the role design and designers can play.

A participatory approach to creating an online conference in the COVID-19 crisis

A team from the Masters programme, trans-form research cluster and external collaborative partners from other universities and not-for-profit organisations came together to organise *Beyond Crisis* a two-day online conference and workshop event. The key questions framing the conference were:

- How to use the virus-induced situation to build up momentum for social-ecological transformation?
- Is the corona crisis an opportunity or threat to social-ecological transformation?

A series of other, minor questions also framed the vision of the conference:

- How can we establish another leading narrative that encourages positive actions?
- What can we do now to nourish positive transformations and prevent the dystopian developments?

- What are the strategies, alliances and actions that can be activated for this purpose?
- Which framings, narrations, images and aesthetics are promising?

Through the DoD blog and its extensive international network, a call was put out for proposals for workshop themes based on the above questions. During just 2 weeks, over 350 participants registered their backgrounds ranging from design practitioners and researchers, heterodox economics (Degrowth and Feminism Alliances), sustainability studies and practices (Environmental Governance, Ecovillages, etc.) to political activism. Data was gathered through the online registration form in which the participants were asked to offer a contribution (talk, workshop or theme or topic) and express their expectations about the conference. The organizing team analyzed the data and through several iterative sessions using post-its with affinity clustering on a Miro whiteboard, identified topics of interest, fields of knowledge and themes that could be tackled during the conference within a “workshop jam”. Over 25 workshop themes were generated by this participatory process through the inputs of the registered participants (Figure 1.). Some workshops were proposed by facilitators with a specific topic, while some thematic workshop themes emerged based on the analysis of the interests and expertise of the registered participants.

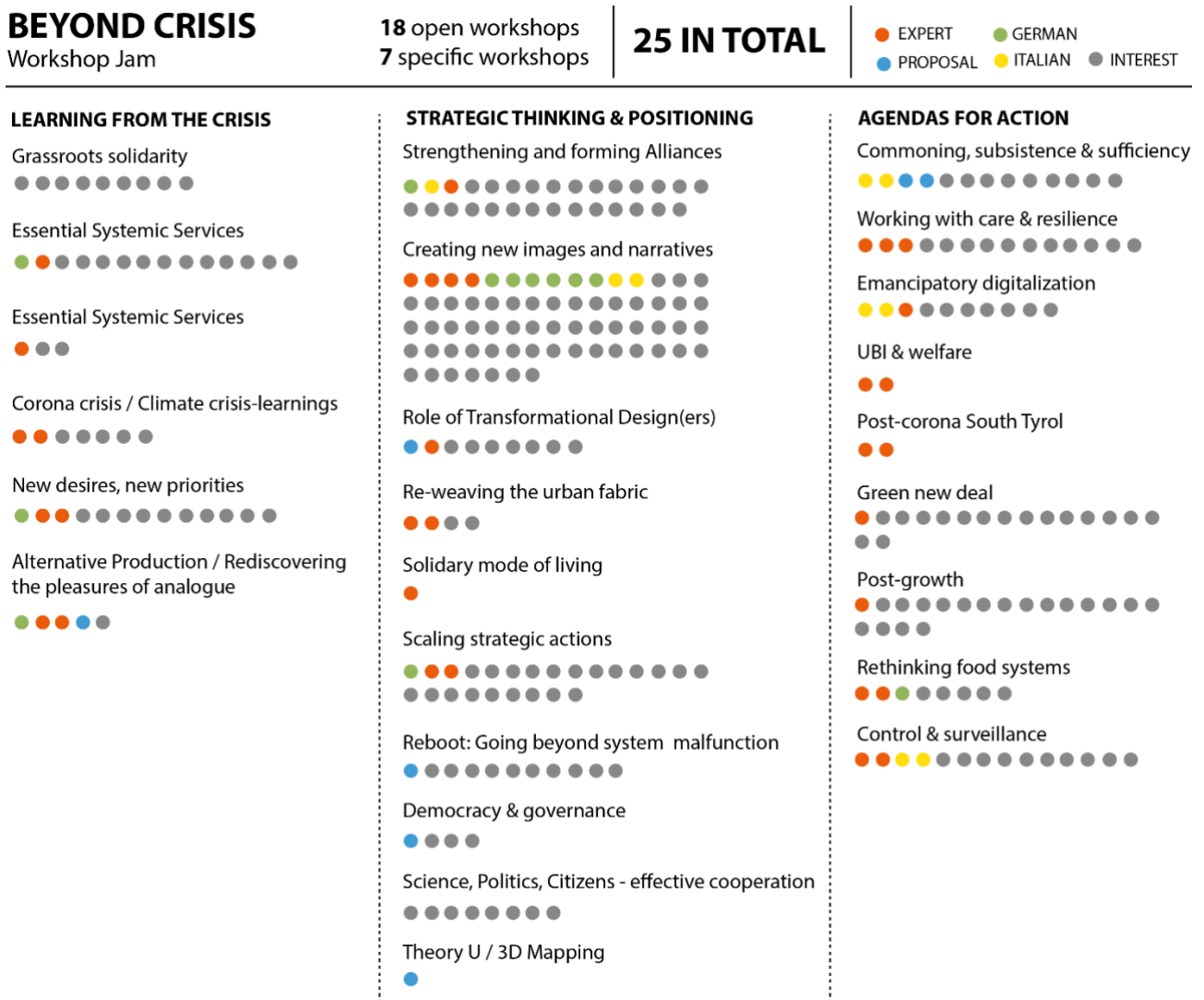


Figure 1: The 25 workshops proposed by the registrants of the conference, synthesised by part of the conference team.

Online modes of participation

The online format of the conference has its limits due to the restriction of screen-based communication. Therefore, the aim of the conference team was to use various interactive tools (such as Miro whiteboards with a workshop template, break-out rooms in Zoom and online social events such as a Social Presencing Theatre) to enhance the engagement of the participants providing an experience of conviviality, lively collaboration and of “social undistancing” as Saskia Hebert called it. The conference team tested Bigbluebutton and other open-source platforms for hosting the conference. However, due to the time constraints and technical limitations the Zoom platform was chosen since it was the tool with the best performance enabling a dialog between so many participants. Additionally, a live stream of the main conference inputs via Youtube was possible for those participants who did not wish to use Zoom due to data privacy issues.

The conference was held over two days. On the first day, 9 experts shared their visions and thoughts around the conference topic with online presentations. Following these talks, and throughout the conference, short breakout sessions of ten minutes were organized by randomly assigning four people to discuss and reflect on the conference issues.

The second day started with some warm-up activities such as yoga and social presencing theatre, which were proposed and conducted by the participants themselves. The main activity was the workshop jam comprising 21 workshops in the programme to which participants subscribed (Figure 1). A maximum of 13 participants per workshop ensured groups were small enough to encourage interaction online. All workshops were offered in parallel sessions.

Two different types of workshops were offered:

- Seven specific workshop formats were planned, facilitated and moderated by the participants and/or speakers who proposed their formats during the registration process.
- Eighteen thematic workshops were compiled according to affinity cluster analysis from the online registration forms. These workshops combined open space format, which means that they were facilitated and guided by the group itself, and the pro-action cafe, facilitating the move from questions to actions. This made it possible to offer multiple parallel workshops, as no major infrastructural preparation was required, but a custom-designed whiteboard, a Miro template (Figure 2), helped facilitate the process. The template offered a short instruction, a set of icons and post-its and was structured in four basic process steps: Introduction, Discussion, Idea development and Conclusion leading to three concrete Action Points. To support this open process, ensure a basic structure and provide visually substantive outcomes, each workshop had a visual note-taker, mainly students experienced in Miro but also external volunteers.

On the second day at the plenum session of the conference a spokesperson from each group presented a brief narrative of their workshop with the focus on the three action points. This was followed by a synthesis of the Action Points from all workshops by two of the authors (see Figures 3 and 4, below).

How to use the virus-induced situation to build up momentum for social-ecological transformation?

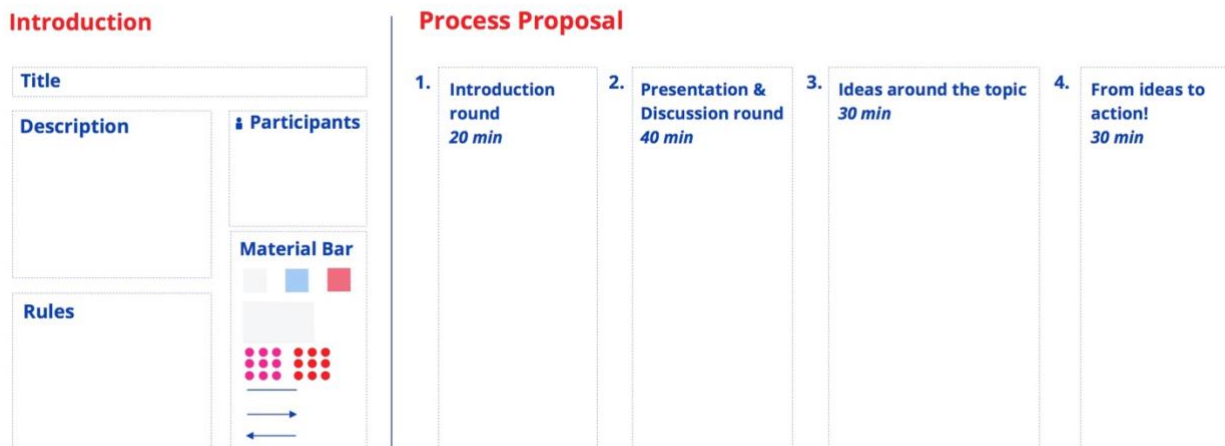


Figure 2: The Miro template used by all the workshop groups.

To provide an interactive feedback system for the participants at the end of the conference, another online tool, Mentimeter (2020), was used. Participants were asked open-ended questions (for example: “What are the inspirations, outcomes, learnings you gathered in the conference?” and “What is next? What actions will you take?”). The results were simultaneously shown to all participants through sharing on-screen. The record of the feedback gathered with Mentimeter gave rise to the possibility to analyse expectations, insights and the actions of and by the participants while revealing their sentiments about the experience. A collective impression of co-presence in digital space emerged as the mind maps grew in real-time.

Real time analysis and synthesis of workshop outputs for the conference audience

After the workshops finished in the morning session of the second day, two of the authors cut and pasted the three specific actions from each workshop into a text document then undertook a pre-coding of the actions to draw out critical key words, following coding methods developed by Saldaña (2013). As this iterative process unfolded one author sketched the concepts and words generated by the key words (Figure 3). The visual map shows the main concepts and the interrelations between them starting from the centre which represents the individual at a micro level and expands to actions that can be done collectively at a macro level. As seen in the illustration, most keywords range between two different states, for instance: micro-macro, individual-collaborative, digital-analogue, possible-impossible, secure-insecure, showing the fact that the crisis triggers a flexible, versatile, plastic thinking to cope with uncertainty and instability. Moreover, this visual and word mapping embraces keywords connected to ideas and solutions that are open and accessible, emphasizing the need for shared knowledge to overcome the obstacles in the times of crisis.

Infra-structuring on a Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) System infra-structuring – keep the good, change the rest!

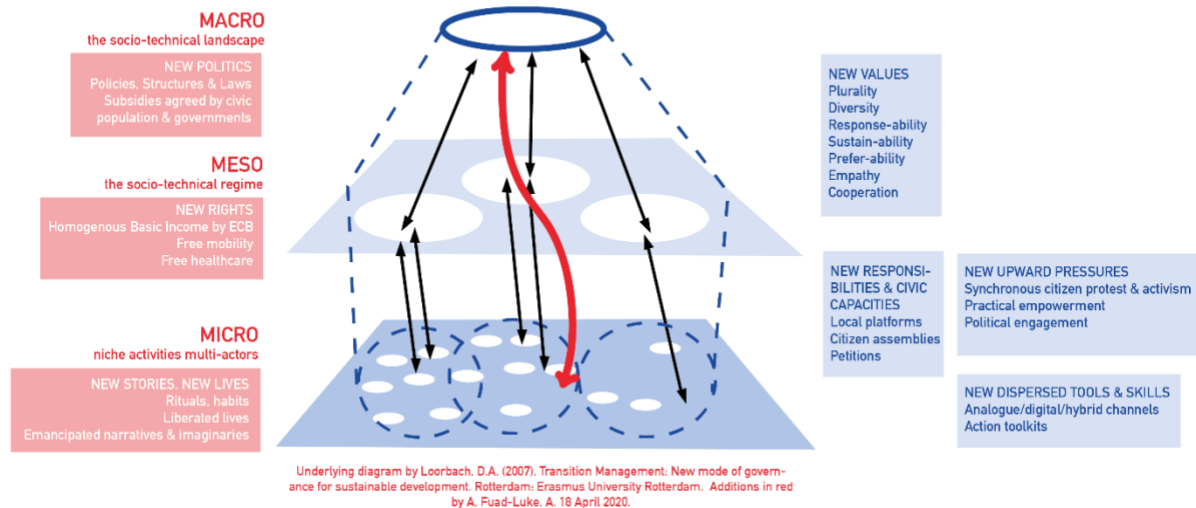


Figure 4: Workshop actions summarised across a Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) diagram.

There was a sense from the conference participants that the participation, discourse and synthesis of outputs built a shared awareness of the threats and opportunities for transition during the COVID-19 circumstances. Also, it was clear that experiencing the conference seemed to empower people emotionally and interpersonally.

Post-conference outputs: The toolkit for designing actions in times of multiple crises

The Mentimeter results for the question “What is next?” was answered by 50 participants. The results range from personal actions to collective ones. Most of the answers were emphasizing the importance of alliances and multidisciplinary perspectives for imagining and building more sustainable futures. Some reported that they would continue working on the ideas developed during the workshop jam in the future, expanding their group to take actions in their localities, such as community building, taking political actions, searching for funding, etc. Two of the groups of workshop participants acted and formally organised active groups to generate specific initiatives - the Strategic Alliances Group and Diverse Economies Resource Fund.

After the conference two of the authors revisited the original *action outputs* of the 21 conference workshops and the keyword coding exercise used to give the conference participants an initial synthesis of the actions within the transition management framing of the Multi-Level Perspective model. An extended keyword list was generated by going through the Word document of the original actions a second time. Keywords were allocated to emergent categories in a new coding exercise. Keywords were then checked against the final category list and either left in the original category or placed in one of the new categories, which were as follows: Issue/Topic/Theme; Concept; Attitude; Facilitation Tools; Actors; and Actions. These categories were used to develop a set of cards and a process - the Toolkit for Designing Actions in Times of Multiple Crises (Figure 5) - that can be used to develop an action plan by/for a group of actors for a particular Issue/Topic/Theme and/or Concept.

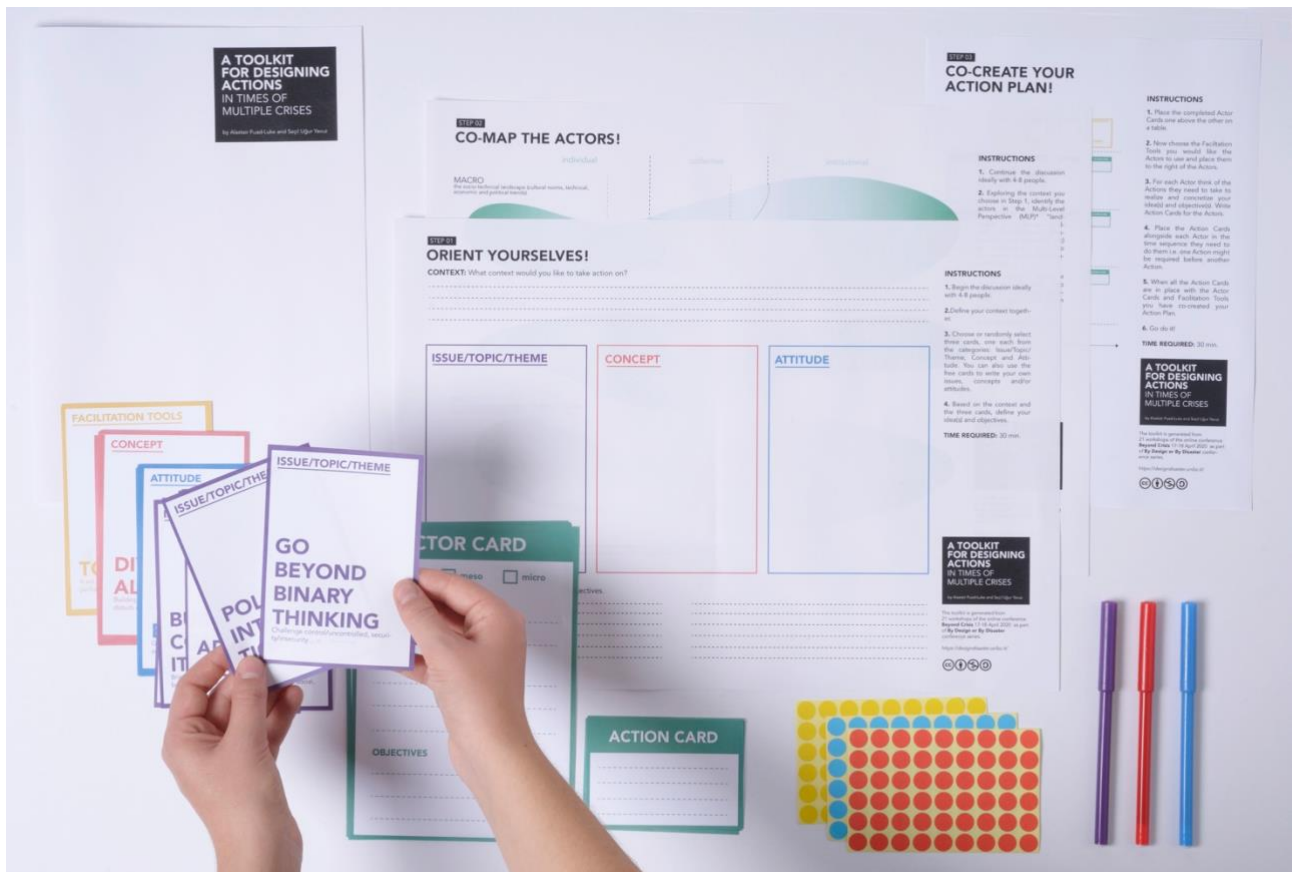


Figure 5: An overview of the Toolkit for Designing Actions in Times of Multiple Crises illustrating the cards, maps and action plan.

The Toolkit provides a stimulating and flexible process for a group of people to co-generate an action plan for a particular context aimed at interventions to facilitate the transition to more sustainable projects and practices. There are three main steps to follow with the Toolkit:

Step 01 Orient yourselves!

1. Begin the discussion ideally with 4-8 people.
2. Define your context together.
3. Choose or randomly select three cards, one each from the categories: Issue/Topic/Theme, Concept and Attitude. You can also use the free cards to write your issues, concepts and/or attitudes.
4. Based on the context and the three cards, define your idea(s) and objective(s).

Step 02 Co-map the actors!

1. Continue the discussion ideally with 4-8 people.
2. Exploring the context you choose in Step 1, identify the actors in the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) “landscape”. Actors can be individuals, collective (groups, communities, not-for-profits etc.) or institutions but also non-human or other-than-human actors.
3. Now select Actors that can best help deliver your idea(s) and objective(s) to create your Action Plan.

Step 03 Co-create your action plan!

1. Place the completed Actor Cards one above the other on a table.
2. Now choose the Facilitation Tools you would like the Actors to use and place them alongside the relevant Actors.
3. Finally, for each Actor, think of the Actions they need to take to realize and concretize your idea(s) and objective(s). Write Action Cards for the Actors.
4. Place the Action Cards alongside each Actor in the time sequence they need to do them i.e. one Action might be required before another Action.
5. When all the Action Cards are in place with the Actor Cards and Facilitation Tools you have co-created your action plan (Figure 6).

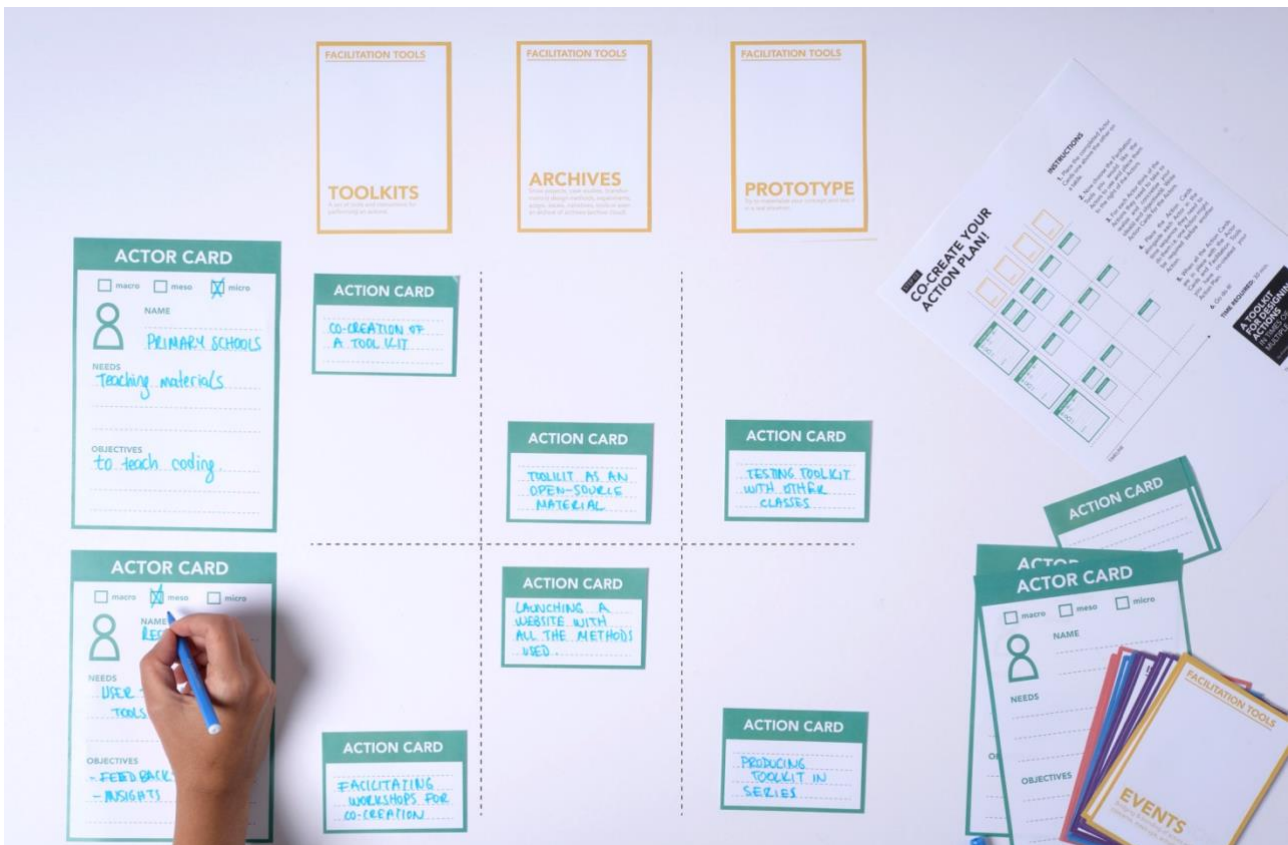


Figure 6: Completing the Actor and Action cards generates the action plan.

Playing with the Toolkit cards facilitates deep discourse around the Issue/Topic/Theme or a Concept, or both and shows how different Attitudes can dramatically affect the dialogue and outcomes for the chosen context. Blank cards also offer the opportunity for participants to write down their own issues, topics, themes, concepts or attitudes and to invent new facilitation tools. New card proposals for the blank cards will grow and enrich the toolkit by each contribution. Brainstorming the potential actors, their needs and objectives also helps build a more systemic awareness of who can contribute to creating new actions that can change or improve a situation or context.

Reflections and next steps

The wide range of participants attending the conference and trans-/interdisciplinary participatory and dialogic design processes helped people from diverse knowledge domains turn workshop discussions into action plans for the contexts where they wanted to encourage ecological and social transformation. The diversity of actions suggested was notable for embracing and integrating actions at the macro, meso and micro levels of a Multi-level Perspective showing a more effective “bigger picture” of areas for change in

the socio-technical landscape, socio-technical regime and how a diversity of actions at the niche level could couple with actions at the higher levels. Adopting a Multi-Level Perspective analysis helps people to get out of their own knowledge and action bubbles and to see the bigger systemic challenges. This can reveal opportunities for seeing and building unusual (strategic) alliances to challenge or disturb existing socio-economic and political systems.

The design processes deployed during the online conference - including the co-designing of the 25 workshop themes, the participatory design templates and working in small groups - helped frame and deal with different aspects of the COVID-19 situation and revealed the connections between the multiple crises. Moreover, most of the participants tended to see the Covid-19 crisis as an opportunity, although they did recognize threats from the existing socio-technical regime.

As the conference was framed around “designing actions” and inviting the participants to come up with action plans, the results of the workshop jam were showing a range of characteristics of how to design, plan and take actions in the multiple crises. Therefore, the conference not only gave rise to many real actions that were taken afterwards by the groups of participants but also to a toolkit that emerged from the valuable insights and ideas generated by the workshop participants. This toolkit represents the participatory nature of the conference, as its content was based on the participants’ action plans. Whether to be a pandemic or other type of crisis, we urge to come up with not only new ideas centred with a human perspective but to take well-designed actions that are in the center of a network of multiple actors including, in Latour’s framing of human and other-than-human actors in Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Latour, 2005). This will help drive the transition towards *preferred* rather than probable, possible or wild card futures (Hancock & Bezold, 1994). Although the focus in the conference was towards human, cultural and social factors, our contingent realities involve biological, ecological and microbial factors so we should also consider an ontological shift towards “natureculture” and multispecies co-existence in symbiosis (Haraway, 2003, 2016). In this sense, we also need an ontological shift in design(-ing) towards *action-centred design* where the contributions of human and other-than-human actors co-regenerate our damaged (eco-)systems through social and material infrastructuring (Star & Ruhleder, 1996). Action-centered design does not seek to put any actors whether to be human or non-human in the center, but to focus on actions that interrelate actors - humans and other-than humans. The prototype Toolkit for Design Actions in Times of Multiple Crises can catalyse fresh thoughts, perceptions, actions and new modes of production that can potentially change the “distribution of the sensible” (Ranciere, 2013 [2000]) and hence challenge the existing socio-technical regimes that exacerbate our multiple crises. The emergence of the toolkit from the conference activities can nourish positive transformations by helping people think about novel strategies, alliances and actions by bringing together different kinds of actors. In doing so actions are generated which create their new narratives challenging existing uncontested narratives towards further dystopian developments. The toolkit, available for download from the DoD blog (By Design By Disaster, 2020) was further tested at the Hier un Da festival in October 2020 to generate more positive narratives for social-ecological transformation.

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