

Critical Turning Points data repository started

October 30 2015

On breakthroughs, setbacks and surprises in processes of Transformative Social Innovation.

By [Bonno Pel](#) (ULB), [Linda Zuijderwijk](#) (IHS) and [Adina Dimitru](#) (UDC).

Through this blog we'd like to introduce you to our database project on Critical Turning Points in transformative social innovation. In the following we will explain how these Critical Turning Points help to make sense of social innovation processes, how we describe them, and how we seek to collect a diversity of those experiences from about 80 social innovation initiatives in various countries.

With the Critical Turning Point database we collect experiences like the one below:

We just needed time to find out how we could respond to the announced regulations. But as we all felt a bit threatened by the way in which the announcement was phrased and framed, it just seemed the logical thing to do [the temporary suspension of their initiative]. To me at least- I had enough sorrow to mind within my own organization [the waste disposal service], and was surely not eager to engage in some principled legal battle that we would eventually lose anyway. It was obviously a critical turning point, as you call it, as we basically had to withdraw the website, the communications and the production of information materials that we had been developing with this small group of people. Moreover, we were just getting the feeling that we were achieving something, as recently a few new members had joined

Processes of Transformative Social Innovation (TSI) are full of breakthroughs, setbacks and surprises. Probably all social innovation initiatives experience them, in one way or another. We call these decisive changes Critical Turning Points (CTPs) and define these as “*moments or events in processes at which initiatives undergo or decide for changes of course*” ([Pel et al. 2015:25](#)). We believe that these CTPs tell a lot about the practical challenges of TSI. In particular, the CTP experiences afford insights into the ways in which SI initiatives change over time, and into the different ways in which they seek to achieve social impacts.

Critical Turning Points - what is challenging social innovation initiatives?

Of course we all like the positive turning points, the breakthroughs. Similarly, we have an interest in avoiding the negative ones, and in finding out what ‘barriers’ exist towards transformative social innovation.

Still, in TRANSIT we consider that it could be deceiving to think in terms of barriers – as if TSI challenges can be found somewhere ‘outside’ from the initiators of transformative social innovation. It is also not so easy to capture the many challenges of transformative social innovation in general success factors and uniform management tricks to overcome these barriers. The TSI challenges differ so much from case to case. Moreover, we often don’t see the challenges coming in the daily course of action. They typically arise through the combinations of several actions - success and failure in transformative social innovation is seldom our own achievement alone. TSI is co-produced, and therefore we need to see how critical turning points arise out of various decisions, developments, responses and trends that are coming together. By

Critical Turning Points data repository started

collecting various experiences of CTPs, we can develop a better sense of the things that can happen to transformation-seeking social innovators. We believe that it is empowering to see and compare how success and failure are co-produced by many actors – in various countries and in various kinds of social innovation.

A repository of Critical Turning Points: making sense of TSI timelines

As of Autumn 2015, we are asking social innovation initiatives to contribute to the development of a database of experiences with processes of transformative social innovation. The CTP data repository will be an open access collection of hundreds of such CTPs, as experienced by around 80 social innovation initiatives in various (mainly European, Latin American) countries. There is a huge reservoir of experiences with TSI processes that we can learn from: Social innovation initiatives can compare their own turning points with those of others, and also policy-makers and intermediary organizations can learn about their role in such decisive changes. The turning points can be compared across countries and contexts, and across the many different kinds of transformations that are currently pursued.

The key element of the CTP data repository is the **timeline of events** through which the history of a social innovation initiative can be visualized. The screenshot below, presenting the fictitious example of the ‘AlterMutuel’ initiative, shows how we will try to construct timelines containing six Critical Turning Points for all 80 social innovation initiatives.

For each of these six CTPs (in orange) we will also collect some ‘related events’ (in black): Important preceding events that prepared the ground for them to happen (several individuals agreeing to form a social innovation initiative, a governmental decision, a changing market, a societal trend), or later events which prepared the ground for these CTPs. The timelines help to reflect on the processes through which social innovation initiatives reach for transformative impacts. Such reflection on their histories also helps reflect on their futures.

The timelines of social innovation initiatives will contain striking breakthroughs that people cherish, but also painful crises that they had preferred to have avoided – the temporary suspension of AlterMutuel is a (stylized, imagined) case in point. Other examples of CTPs are a change in mission, the governmental introduction of impact monitoring procedures, an adaptation of strategy, a new partnership with others (or a decision to part ways), an ‘Aha-Erlebnis’ after which one sees one’s own activities in a new light, a turn to join in market-oriented activities, or a decision to become (no longer) politically active.

The screenshot below shows that CTPs are not only decisions of social innovation initiatives in full control of their destiny – they are typically mixtures of own decisions and developments that just happen to initiatives, such as changing regulations.

This stylized example also shows how we develop CTP stories through six key topics. Each of these topics develop particular aspects of CTPs:

Description: What did the CTP consist of? Why was it considered ‘critical’?

Co-production: Which other actors/developments made it happen?

Related events: Which earlier events evoked the CTP, and which later events were evoked by it?

Contestation: What struggles and discussions were involved with the CTP?

Critical Turning Points data repository started

Anticipation: Had one seen the CTP coming?

Learning: What has been learned from the CTP? How does it inform current practice?

Through these 6 key aspects of CTPs, the widely different experiences across different contexts can be systematically compared. We believe that the CTP data repository can thus support the practical and academic quests for a deeper understanding of transformation processes and the challenges of transformative social innovation. With this database initiative we seek to substantiate how TRANSIT aspires towards theory development that is thoroughly grounded in, and relevant to, transformative practice.

Learning from experiences of social innovators all over the world.

We also want to support social innovators all over the world in their processes of learning from their own experience and the experience of others. In constructing the CTP database, the initiatives that will inform us about their experience and in doing so will also once again reflect on what those critical moments were and how they affected the development and course of action of the social innovation initiative. Witnessing the experience of others will support the gathering of additional insight and the finding of validation in the sharing of challenges and successes. The database will also provide a unique opportunity to observe alternative ways of dealing with similar challenges and be able to assess the result of different courses of action. Both social innovators and researchers will thus be able to learn from a wide range of experiences of innovation and incorporate new insights on social transformation.

As the project proceeds we will provide you with regular updates on the Critical Turning Points-repository. Meanwhile, we look forward to receiving your questions and suggestions. What analyses would be worthwhile doing through this collection of CTP experiences ? What practical applications could be developed through the database? Let us know via communication.transit@ihs.nl.