



# Towards a new politics of rapid transition<sup>1</sup>

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In this Insight we explore the need for a more disruptive politics to enable innovations that successfully challenge powerful existing systems.

## KEY MESSAGES

- Innovation and experimentation for climate change need to challenge and replace unsustainable systems, practices or behaviours rather than 'plugging in' minor improvements to an existing system.
- The pace and depth of innovation and experimentation are often frustrated by powerful actors in current systems who seek to protect their share of the market and prevent the entry of potential competitors.
- Governments can support ecosystems of change by using the levers available to them to enable shifts in finance, production and technology. Creative multi-actor alliances of government, business, civil society and trade unions may be required to build support for bolder interventions.
- As well as supporting new technological innovations, policies, programmes and funding need to rebalance the power embedded in existing systems by bringing in new actors supportive of rapid and progressive change.

## Introduction

Achieving and replicating rapid transitions that are both far-reaching and unprecedented in terms of scale—which, as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change special report suggests, is required to keep warming below 1.5°C—means engaging with the deep politics of transition. Such changes are often resisted by powerful actors within current systems and there is a huge challenge in terms of the scale and speed of interlinked shifts required in finance and technologies, infrastructures and governance, and social behaviours and change.

Transitions are constrained by state capacity, the nature of markets and finance and the form of civil society engagement, which differ across societies. There are also few direct historical parallels for the sorts of transformation now envisaged. Moreover, transitions must be undertaken alongside action to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), questions of justice and resilience also need to be attended to.

This Insight asks:

- How do forms of innovation and experimentation contribute to deepening and accelerating just transitions and broader transformations that go beyond calls to scale up and roll out new technologies and innovations?
- How do we avoid the danger of engaging in ambitious programmes of innovation and technology development that fail to disrupt unsustainable trajectories of production and consumption and patterns of behaviour by corporations, cities and consumers?

Exploring experiences and approaches to innovation and rapid transition with examples of gas, biofuels, climate-smart agriculture and electric vehicles, we analysed how we can deliberately and urgently instigate shifts in politics to catalyse, scale up and share innovations or accelerate experimentation in policy and governance, technology, finance and behaviour change.

This Insight summarises the lessons from this experience and what this means for policymakers engaged in instigating the rapid changes needed to achieve net zero targets.

## The role of governments, alliances and citizens

Addressing climate change effectively requires active interventions from all actors. But governments are particularly well placed to orchestrate other ecosystems of transformation using a variety of levers and tools at their disposal.

Interventions in one area have knock-on effects elsewhere, amplifying the overall impact. Supply-side policies can redirect finance in new directions, bringing about shifts in business practice away from fossil fuels when combined with new rules on disclosure and corporate governance, for example.

Enhancing the representation of beneficiaries of climate action in policy processes can tilt the balance of power towards more ambitious action when combined with measures to withdraw state support to fossil fuel industries. Tax and fiscal measures to help local businesses and cities raise their level of ambition can trigger change from below, setting off waves of change among transnational city networks.

Building multi-level and multi-actor alliances is key to engaging different parts of the state in ambitious and progressive innovation and experimentation. Governments may be reluctant to support niche innovation and experimentation in new areas—for instance, if they have stakes in state-owned enterprises or benefit from other forms of incumbency. Some governments have more power than others to enact the sorts of policies and pathways we discuss here, and certain ministries and levels of the state are more inclined to support ambitious action than others.

This points to the need for creative multi-actor alliances that work with actors in government, business, civil society and trade unions and rally behind support for bolder interventions. The work of such alliances is already apparent in Europe around calls for divestment (including most recently the European Investment Bank's plan to drop funding for new coal)<sup>2</sup> and for greater support for renewable energy.

Cities, municipal and regional governments and supranational institutions can support more ambitious forms of innovation and experimentation by creating positive enabling environments through regulation, planning, fiscal and other measures (such as tax breaks, preferential rates for local businesses) to support niche business and community actors.

This can create positive practice that is shared and amplified by networks and coalitions of business and civil society actors showcasing what is possible and generating demand for positive change elsewhere.

If innovation and experimentation are to deliver social as well environmental benefits, it is vital to open up decision making not only to potential beneficiaries, but also to other groups that may be impacted, both positively and negatively.

As well as more active consultations on specific innovations, using citizens' assemblies and other participatory approaches can help chart out socially acceptable decarbonisation pathways. This can help avoid the imposition of unpopular policy measures, improving the chances of lasting success with deeper ownership and public acceptance. Frameworks for doing this in the European context are available through the Aarhus Convention.<sup>3</sup>

## A transition is more than just carbon

Support for innovation and experimentation cannot be reduced to decarbonisation. Governments in Europe and around the world have signed up to the SDGs, which means that responses to climate change also have to consider the impacts on food security, access to water and energy, and the need to avoid conflict.

This poses a huge challenge for conventional policymaking, but more inclusive and participatory processes improve the chances of identifying and helping to address key concerns. Innovation needs to focus not only on carbon, but on supporting and scaling up technologies, infrastructures and practices that build resilience and regenerate ecosystems rather than deplete them.

Experimentation and innovation in one part of the world has impacts on the pathways and policy options available to others. For example, electric vehicles, biofuels and climate-smart agriculture show that the costs of adjustment and decarbonisation can be passed on to other societies and social groups in the search for low-carbon energy, food and transportation, for example. The pursuit of just transitions must be transnational and intergenerational, therefore, and not just in relation to particular places and transitions.

## Shifting the balance of power

The pace and depth of innovation and experimentation are often frustrated by powerful actors in current systems, who may seek to protect their market share or their role in providing energy and transport services, for example.

To create space and demand for new forms of innovation, their power and access to decision making have to be restricted. This means putting in place policies and measures that restrict party funding, minimise the revolving door between governments and established industry actors and enlarge the representation of beneficiaries of ambitious climate action, including younger people. This might include greater representation of future generations and efforts to lower voting ages.

Changing the political balance of power is a first step towards more disruptive and ambitious forms of innovation and experimentation. We need to move beyond what we call 'plug-and-play' approaches. These try to slot new energy sources or technologies into existing infrastructures and decision-making processes, but can generate negative social and environmental outcomes because the same providers and business models are in play.

Dominant approaches to innovation and experimentation assume an 'as well as' model of change rather than an 'instead of' approach, which requires abandoning those patterns of consumption and production that are no longer compatible with the imperatives of tackling climate change. Disruptive approaches need to actively enable new social and economic actors to lead transitions that redesign energy, transport, food and waste systems, for example, so that they meet broader social and human needs.

Necessity is the mother of all invention. Governments must seriously consider so-called supply-side policies, placing clear limits on the further extraction of fossil fuel reserves. The only way to redirect finance towards lower carbon technologies, infrastructures and services is to make clear that some models of wealth creation are off-limits. In practice, this implies the use of bans and moratoria, active phase-downs and clear timelines for managed decline. Businesses need a clear and consistent signal that the end game for fossil fuels has arrived.

## Conclusions

Technological innovations need to replace current systems rather than incrementally improve them, moving beyond plug-and-play or 'as well as' models towards 'instead of' models. Innovations that successfully challenge existing systems with powerful actors and resources behind them will need multi-actor coalitions of support to embed and protect them.

Innovation is often seen as a technocratic exercise in which governments, citizens and wider alliances have little role to play. However, to instigate and accelerate a just transition using innovation and experimentation, a more disruptive politics will be needed. This means working on institutional innovation and a shift in power relations.

Innovations in democracy and accountability can challenge existing power structures. Those that strengthen democratic decision making include greater citizen engagement, controls on party funding, changes to corporate governance, independent climate committees, votes for 16-year-olds, and ombudspersons for future generations.

Such innovations need to be combined with stronger mechanisms of accountability for key decisions about

transition pathways. Strengthening democratic decision making should go beyond isolated sites of engagement such as citizens' assemblies—important though they are—and independent oversight committees, like the Committee on Climate Change, to incorporate areas of government decision making that are traditionally protected from democratic oversight and forms of citizen engagement.

This includes policy domains concerned with industrial policy, energy policy and trade policy.

## Endnotes

1. See the full paper Newell, P. and Martin, A. (2020) The role of the state in the politics of disruption and acceleration. Available at [climate-kic.org/insights](https://climate-kic.org/insights)
2. [bankwatch.org/blog/the-eib-finally-limits-coal-lending](https://bankwatch.org/blog/the-eib-finally-limits-coal-lending)
3. The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters was adopted on 25 June 1998 in the Danish city of Aarhus (Århus) at the Fourth Ministerial Conference as part of the "Environment for Europe" process. [ec.europa.eu/environment/aarhus/](https://ec.europa.eu/environment/aarhus/)

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